NEW, COMPLETE STORIES NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED

25c
MARCH
A THRILLING PUBLICATION

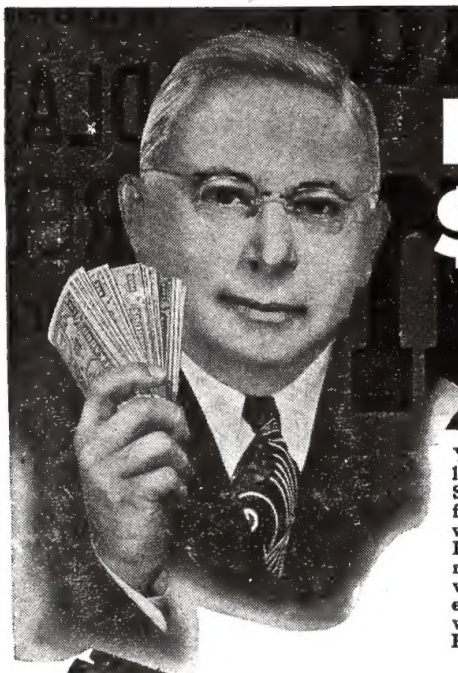
The Rio Kid Western

FEATURING

BADLANDS BREED

By ROE RICHMOND

ANC



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The Rio Kid Western

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. XXV, No. 3 MARCH, 1953

A COMPLETE RIO KID NOVEL

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It wasn't the cattle boom but the boom of tyrant guns that brought the Rio Kid into these brawling Badlands

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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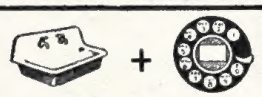

You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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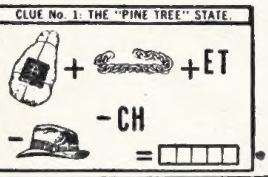

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Conducted by LESLIE ERNENWEIN

HE GOES by a different name now, and he looks different. Age has frosted his hair and warped his tall frame, but his liking for fast horses is the same as when I first met Tex Smith in Montana thirty-four years ago.

That was near Montline on the Wyoming-Montana border. I had shipped out of Chicago with a trainload of gandy dancers destined to a construction camp on the C. B. & Q. They were a fiddle-footed breed and began dropping off the train during the first couple hundred miles. By the time the train rolled into the construction camp there weren't many of us left, and I made it one less by hitting a shuck up the tracks right after breakfast the next morning.

The food in that camp was bad, and the bugs were worse, but by noon, hungry, thirsty and footsore, I was regretting my desertion. Except for a couple trains that roared past, I hadn't seen a human, a habitation or even a cow. Just a lot of wide-open space.

Close-Mouthed Camper

Some time after noon I glimpsed a water tank in the distance, and felt better. Freight trains would stop there eventually, and I could ride one into Miles City. It was coming sundown when I got to the high-stilted wooden tank. The mucky seep beneath it was the most welcome water I ever drank. I stayed with the water like a desert-bred steer and was belly down in the mud when a man rode up leading a packhorse.

He didn't pay me much heed at first. He was tanned, sober-faced and close-mouthed as a Sioux. He made camp near a cattle pen nearby, unsaddling and taking a bedroll off his packhorse. When he led his horse over to the tank for water I observed that they were just about the finest I'd ever seen. They were both sorrels, both geldings, and perfectly matched, being short-coupled and about fifteen hands. They interested me much more than their owner.

He looked like a hundred other cowpokes: flat-crowned Stetson, faded shirt, faded levis and brush-scabbed boots. But unlike most cowpokes, he wasn't hunting strayed cattle or horses. He was hunting for a man he intended to kill. I didn't know that then. All I knew was that this jigger had the best horses I'd seen in Cattleland. And I told him so.

Copperbottoms from Texas

It was an odd thing. Until I praised his horses he'd acted like I wasn't there. But soon as I spoke of the sorrels he thawed out like snow on a hot roof.

"They're Copperbottoms," he said. "Texas Quarterhorses. Don't reckon they come much better anywhere."

It didn't sound like bragging, the way he said it. But there was a prideful look in his eyes, as if just talking about those two horses pleasured him.

Well, we introduced ourselves and he invited me over to his campfire for supper. I don't recall what we ate, but I do remember that he made two or three batches of coffee while we sat there talking horse far into the night. He knew a lot about the Copperbottom strain. It went all the way

back to Sir Archy which was a son of the great Diomed.

Along about when the campfire's embers were dying out, Tex Smith told me the reason he needed the best horses money could buy. "I'm hunting a human coyote that needs killing bad," he said. "I've chased him all the way from Texas and may have to chase him clean into Canada."

The next time I saw Tex Smith was in California. I'd been working at Santa Barbara for a horse outfit which went broke. The man I'd been working for paid me off with a strawberry roan mare named Pink Lady, a pair of saddlebags loaded with grub, and a blanket. I headed east toward the Mohave country and it was a lonely ride.

I camped close to a hobo jungle near the railroad tracks on the outskirts of a little town called Sangus, walked over and traded a loaf of bread for a portion of good slum gullion stew some hoboes were feasting on, and when I came back to my horse, there was Tex Smith and his two sorrels.

We were both glad to meet up again. Tex had a few dollars so he went into town and bought some beer. That was quite a reunion. It lasted three days while we ate high off the hog and rested up our ponies. Just before we parted I asked Tex if he'd caught up with his coyote. He shook his head and muttered, "But I'm still hunting him."

There He Was!

That was so long ago that I'd forgotten there was such a person as Tex Smith. But last spring I took a pasear down to Texas for the race meet at Eagle Pass, which is smackdab on the Rio Grande, and there was old Tex, leaning on the rail and rooting for a filly that had some of that same Copperbottom blood that was in those two geldings I'd seen thirty-four years ago.

He doesn't go by the name Tex Smith any more. I didn't ask him about his coyote hunt. Didn't need to. Not after he told me what his new name was. On the way back to town, he said quietly, "I caught my coyote, Ernie, but I still cotton to fast horses same as before."

So we sat up half the night, talking horse on the Eagle Hotel veranda and remembering back to our first meeting at a water tank in Montana.

Seems like a tolerable long time ago. It was.

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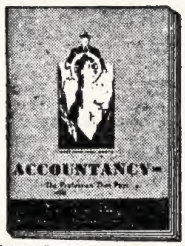

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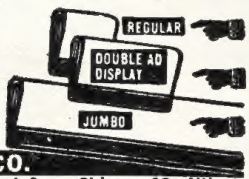

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THE BADLANDS OF DAKOTA

Historical Background of This Issue's Novel

IN THE EARLY 1880's, ranching was on the boom in the Badlands of Dakota, which were ripe for exploitation by cattle raisers. In the heart of this country the settlement of Little Missouri, on the western shore of the Little Missouri River, was known as the toughest town on the Northern Pacific Railroad line, swarming with cattlemen, cowboys, gamblers, gunmen, trappers, Buffalo hunters, rustlers, drifters and fugitives.

Antoine de Vallombrosa, the Marquis de Mores, was quick to see the possibilities here, and soon controlled some of the best water rights and grasslands. Another rancher who recognized the vast potentialities of the Dakota ranges was Theodore Roosevelt, who established the Maltese Cross brand and began ranching on a more modest scale.

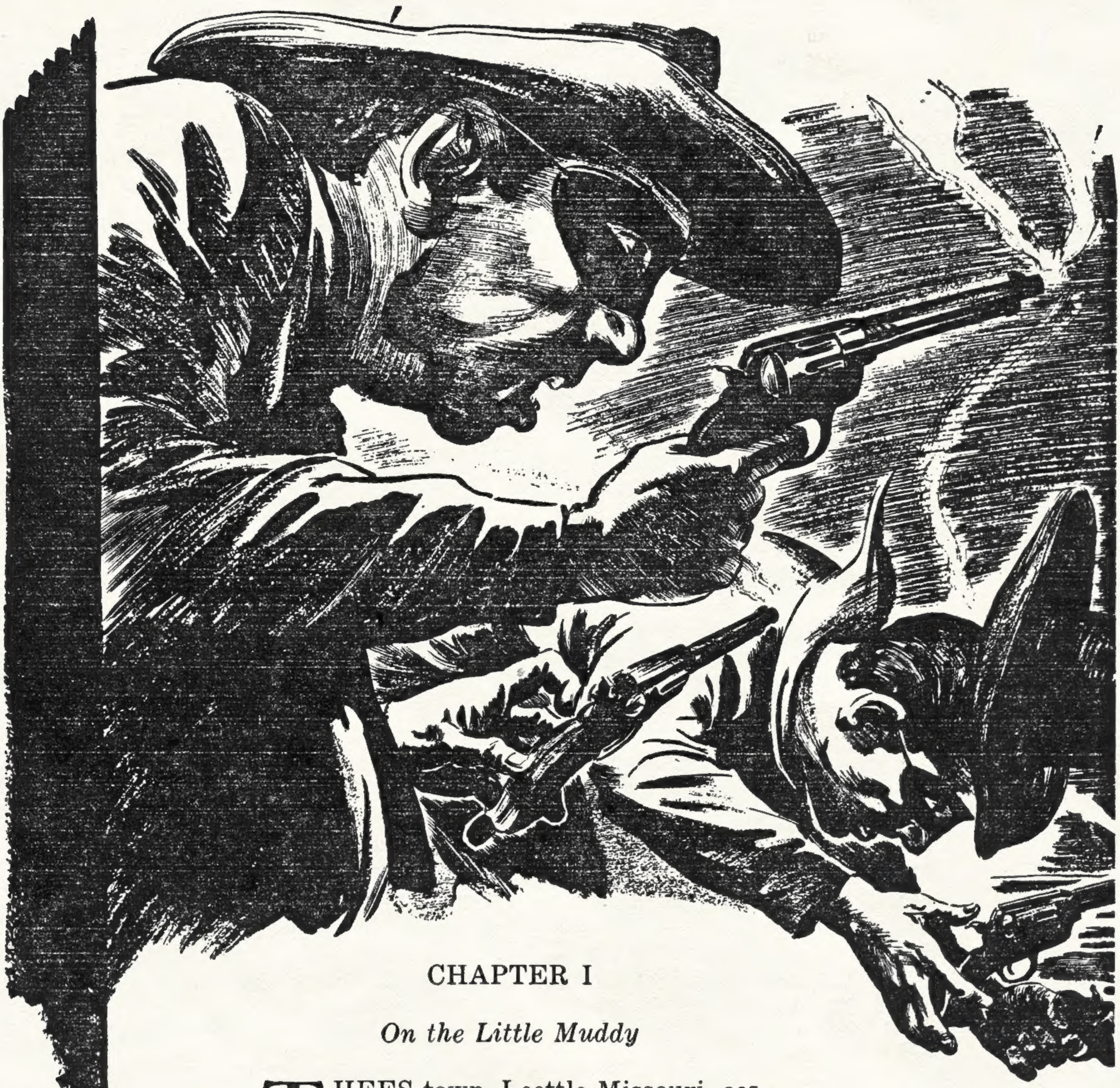
Stock rustling, which had been so rampant in Montana, was now spreading into the Badlands of Dakota, and de Mores was one of the heaviest losers. But the Little Missouri ranchers were slower than the Montanans in organizing against the outlaws.

Badlands cattlemen were far from enthusiastic about aiding the Marquis de Mores, who was almost universally—and unjustly—resented and condemned. When de Mores fenced off parts of his range, to protect his prize breeding stock, it made him all the more unpopular among the Westerners, who hated fencing in any form.

Repeated cutting of de Mores's fences led to a fight between the Marquis and three buffalo hunters, in which Riley Luffsey was killed and Frank O'Donald and Dutch Wannigan wounded. De Mores was arrested, jailed and stood trial for this, but was acquitted, because the buffalo hunters obviously had been trespassing and destroying his property. This didn't, of course, make him any better liked, but the dynamic and debonair Frenchman was a fearless fighter who could hold his own with any of the gunhands in the region.

According to legend, de Mores was in line for the French throne, and planned to use the profits from his cattle enterprises to finance a revolution and restore the monarchy in France, with himself wearing the crown. But de Mores's vast beef empire was crumbling as swiftly as it had mushroomed. The Great Blizzard of 1887 demolished his herds in a final crushing blow. Then de Mores, his family and entourage boarded his private railroad car and left the Dakota Badlands forever.

BADLANDS



CHAPTER I

On the Little Muddy

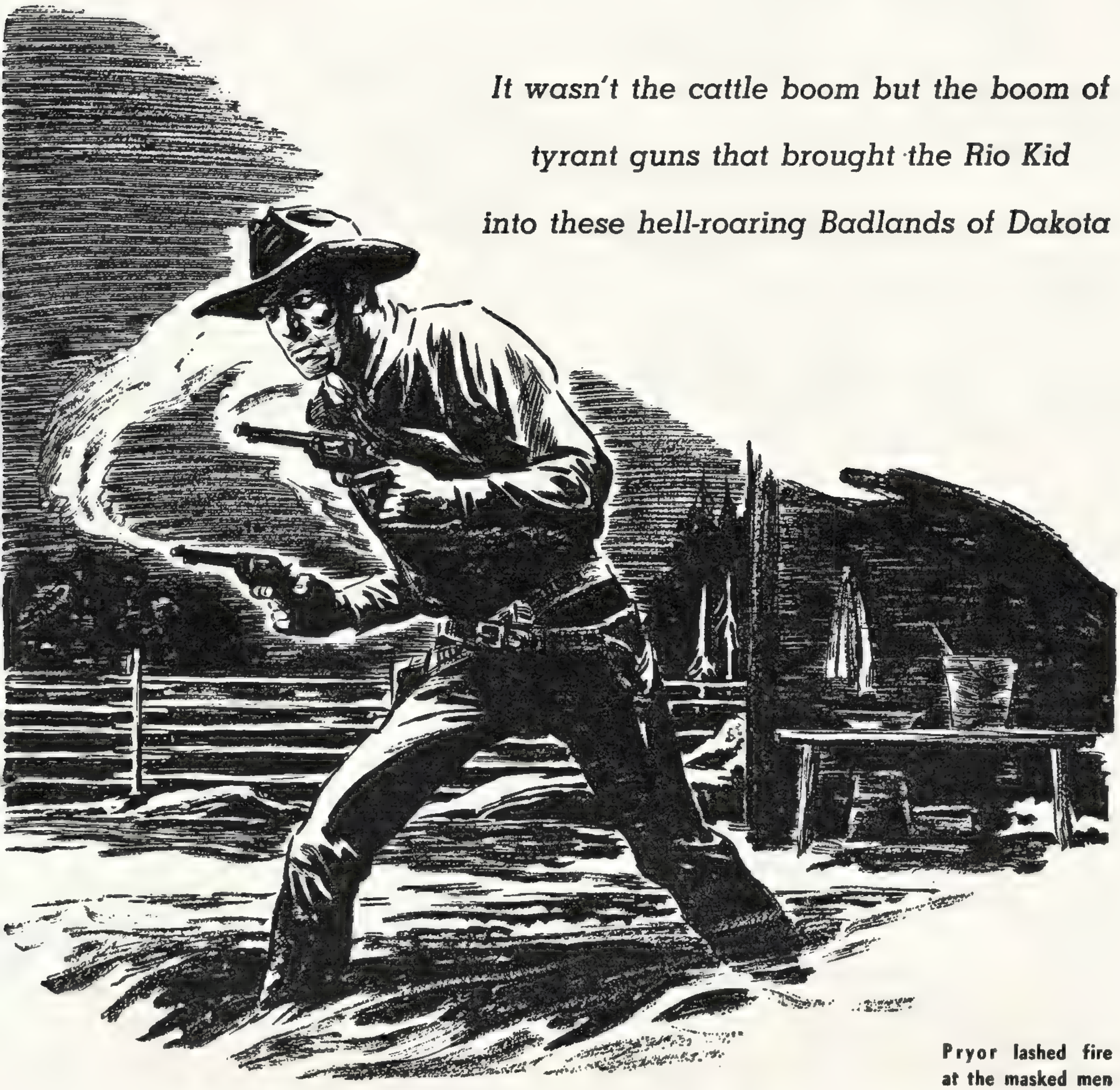
"THEES town, Leettle Missouri, ees tough, General?" the slim, dark rider on the handsome black gelding asked his saddle companion. "Like the old trail towns we knew?"

"Northern Pacific Railroad men call

BREED

A Novel by ROE RICHMOND

It wasn't the cattle boom but the boom of tyrant guns that brought the Rio Kid into these hell-roaring Badlands of Dakota



Pryor lashed fire at the masked men

it the toughest town on the line." The other rider nodded. "I don't suppose they ever saw Abilene, Newton, Ellsworth, Wichita, Hays, and Dodge, at their peak. But it's probably tough enough, amigo."

The man who had been called "General" looked and sat his saddle like a cavalryman, rangy and lean on his rawboned dun. But like his compadre, he wore rough, dusty range clothing.

The two riders moved up the western bank of the Little Missouri River in the Dakota Badlands, approaching the settlement known as Little Missouri, which had a raw wild frontier aspect. Across the stream on the eastern shore was another town, newer, cleaner and more civilized, with unusual pretensions toward elegance and grandeur.

"Medora," said Bob Pryor, in response to his Mexican friend's questioning glance. "New and rich, built by a wealthy French nobleman, I understand."

"And the Black Hills, no?" Celestino Mireles said, with a graceful gesture at darkly wooded heights in the distance.

Pryor nodded. "You remember Deadwood up there, Celestino?"

Mireles smiled. "I remember Deadwood and Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane."

They had been in Deadwood to break up a freighters' war and put down the Buckskins, an outlaw band that preyed on wagon trains, when Hickok had been shot in the back and killed by Jack McCall. It didn't seem possible, but that must have been eight years ago. Time was fleeting, Pryor reflected. A lot of men, both good and bad, had died since Wild Bill went under.

"Now we ride to help a sheepman in thees country," Mireles said musingly. "The odds weel be long as ever, General."

Robert Pryor, who was not a general, but a former captain of cavalry, had discarded his uniform for this venture, just as Celestino Mireles had abandoned his usual colorful *caballero* garb. It might be necessary for them to conceal their identity and work undercover, and they did not want to be conspicuous.

Ever since the War Between the States, in which Pryor had served with the Union Army although he was a Texan by birth, these two men had dedicated themselves to side the weak against the strong, to fight oppression and greed and cruelty wherever they found it in the West.

PRYOR had become famous as the Rio Kid, and his handsome comrade of Castilian ancestry was nearly as well-known as the man he insisted on calling General. On this occasion, they had been summoned North by a young newspaper editor, who had written the Rio Kid that a sheepman named Overbaugh and other people were being brutally abused in the Badlands of Dakota.

It was late afternoon, with the shadows lengthening on the sage and buffalo grass plains, when the two riders crossed the river and entered the immaculate community of Medora. They were at once impressed by the De Mores Hotel, the De Mores Theater, the De Mores Club, and a huge rambling establishment outside of town, which Pryor said was a packing plant, also owned by Antoine de Vallombrosa, the Marquis de Mores.

"Thees de Mores must be a beeg man, General," murmured Mireles, that characteristic smile of his flashing in his aristocratic dark face.

"This is his town, named after his wife," Bob Pryor said. "He was driven out of Little Missouri, they say, so he built a town of his own on this side of the river."

"A man so beeg and reech?" Mireles said wonderingly. "How come they drive him out like that?"

Pryor smiled gravely. "At rare times, Celestino, the rich as well as the poor are persecuted. This seems to be one such instance."

"We are going to help thees reech hombre then?"

"If he needs it. We help anyone who needs us, don't we?"

"Ees true," Mireles assented dubiously. "But eef I own all thees I don't theenk I need much help, General."

"You can't ever tell; Celestino," said Pryor. "Wealth and property aren't always protection for the lives of a man and his family. Sometimes possessions endanger the lives of rich owners."

"Ees true," Mireles said, with more conviction and comprehension, making

CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR
The Rio Kid

the Sign of the Cross. "Was true, General, weeth your family and mine in Texas."

Bob Pryor nodded grimly, the pain and loneliness still in him after all these years, the horror but little dimmed by time. Returning home after Appomattox he had found the ranch in ruins, his parents murdered by Border bandits. Later, on the trail of the outlaw killers, Pryor had saved young Mireles's life, after Border ruffians had slain the Mexican's folks and pillaged their hacienda. Ever since then Pryor and Mireles had been close *compadres*, their guns devoted to righting wrongs, aiding the needy, and combating evil.

They stopped for a drink in the barroom of the De Mores Hotel, an emporium glittering with great mirrors and fancy bottles, crystal chandeliers, polished brass and golden-fleshed nudes, as elaborate as anything in Kansas City or St. Louis, Denver or Cheyenne. Then, following directions to the newspaper office, they dismounted before a bare shedlike structure with "BADLANDS COWBOY" painted on the shingles of the pitched roof.

In the cluttered interior, smelling of printer's ink, newsprint, and oiled presses, the young editor, A. T. Packard, rose from a littered desk to greet them.

Packard was tall, well-built and easy-moving, his clean-cut, intelligent features partly obscured by a newly grown mustache and neatly trimmed beard. He had come West after graduating from the University of Michigan, where he'd been a star baseball player, to take advantage of the boom brought on by de Mores's extravagant spending and establish a newspaper, the *Badlands Cowboy*. Tentative recognition lighted Packard's expressive eyes as he came forward saying:

"Captain Pryor and Celestino Mireles? I thought so, from the descriptions I've of you. This is a pleasure—an honor and a privilege, gentlemen." Packard shook hands with them, his grip firm and strong. "Come in and make yourselves at home. Dump that junk off those chairs and settle down in comfort. Can't afford enough help yet to keep this place in decent order."

Packard poured a round of drinks, passed out cigars, and sat back to survey his visitors with quiet approval and satisfaction.

HE LIKED the fine lean thoroughbred-look of Pryor's face and figure, the set of the well-shaped chestnut

head, the clear blue eyes and strong handsome features. There was a blend of lithe grace and speed and raw power in the Rio Kid that Packard recognized immediately.

He thought, what an athlete Pryor would have been, in a different environment!

THE editor was also pleased with the slender, lithe Mireles, with his brilliant dark eyes, charming smile, and refined patrician face. This Mexican obviously was a descendant of Spanish dons, Castilian grandees.

Packard concluded, his writer's mind always seeking similes, they're like thoroughbreds of different breeds.

"The situation is this," the editor said. "Odin Overbaugh, unwisely perhaps, brought sheep into this beef country. Fortunately he was wise enough to stake out a barren claim south of here, unused by the cattlemen and embracing no important water rights, nothing but wasteland until his arrival. Most of the ranchers here, despite their hatred of sheep, were willing to let Overbaugh stay, as long as he kept his sheep off their ranges and the smell of them out of their nostrils.

"But not Luke Breason, of Bible, who fancies himself monarch of the Badlands—or did, until the coming of de Mores. Breason has some pretty tough gunsharps riding for him, men like Cape Mifflin, Hash Creswell, Ace Adair, Piper Rabb, and Kid Madrid. He has pledged himself either to drive Overbaugh out, or destroy the man, his family and his flocks.

"I tried to raise enough opposition to keep Breason in line, but it was impossible. I'm no gunfighter, of course, and everybody else here is deathly afraid of Breason and the Bible Ranch—everyone except the Marquis de Mores. De Mores fears nobody, nothing on earth, but he hasn't any gunmen to stand up against Breason's professional killers. Roosevelt of the Maltese Cross would like to defend Overbaugh, but he's an Easterner like myself, no more of a gunhand than I am, and he hasn't any crew to speak of on that small spread. So, as a final resort, I sent for the Rio Kid."

"I'm glad you did," Pryor said simply. "It sounds like a worthy cause, and I hope we can handle it satisfactorily. I have no great love for sheep, but I wouldn't stand by and see a sheepman maltreated and overrun. Especially by a force such as Bible seems to be."

"Breason's thoroughly rotten," said Packard. "He built up his brand by mavericking and rustling, and he still runs off cattle from neighboring spreads. Cattle and horses both, particularly de Mores's stock. But the law's in Breason's vest pocket, as he boasts, and no one else is strong enough to buck him. De Mores would shoot it out with Breason, but he can't get by that gunpack of Luke's. Even the death of Breason wouldn't end the tyranny. They've all got to die."

"You like this Marquis de Mores?" inquired the Rio Kid, examining the fine ash on his cigar.

"I do, Captain Pryor," said Packard promptly. He added ruefully, "And I'm about the only man in Dakota who does. He's the most hated man in the Badlands—for no good reason at all. Public opinion should be against Breason, but he has turned it against de Mores."

"How do you account for the feeling against the Frenchman?"

"That's part of it—his nationality. The fact that he's a foreigner, wealthy and titled, makes him unpopular. On top of that de Mores is a true aristocrat, handsome, polished, debonair, with perfect poise and manners, a great and gallant gentleman. People resent him for that. But most of all perhaps, they hate him for acquiring his wealth through marriage to an American heiress."

"I see," murmured Pryor. "That's human nature, I guess."

"In Cannes, on the Riviera, de Mores met and married Medora von Hoffman, the proud and beautiful daughter of a multi-millionaire New Yorker banker.

Her dowry was said to be three million dollars, but *I* don't believe de Mores married her for money. They are deeply in love, and a strikingly handsome couple, as you will see. They came to Little Missouri in a private railroad car, embossed with the de Mores and von Hoffman coats-of-arms. After looking over the unclaimed grasslands hereabouts, the Marquis decided to invest his fortune in the Badlands."

PACKARD refilled their whisky glasses and went on:

"De Mores knew a lot about water rights, apparently. By careful placement of claims on the Little Missouri River, he took over forty-five thousand acres, which actually controls several hundred thousand acres of excellent buffalo grass grazing land. It cost him only thirty-two thousand dollars. At several points, he shut the Bible Ranch off from water, and controlled free grass formerly used by Luke Breason. Which explains, in part, Breason's hatred of the Marquis.

"De Mores quickly adapted himself to the dress and customs of the country, proving himself a finished horseman and firearms expert. He tried to be friendly and pleasant to everyone, but the local people would not accept him. He bought up trail herds as fast as they came in, and soon had a bigger ranch than the Bible, far larger than anything else in the Badlands. But the bigger he grew, the more he was despised. It got so bad that de Mores could no longer endure it in Little Missouri. Literally forced out of town by wholesale hatred and enmity, he crossed the river and founded this settlement of Medora."

Packard sighed, drank, and puffed on his cigar. "But even here," he went on then, "there is no peace, safety or security for de Mores and his family and employees. For all his money and holdings, Captain Pryor, the Marquis is being victimized as badly as poor Overbaugh —and by the same outfit, Breason's Bible."

"Just what is the Bible doing to de Mores?" asked Pryor.

"Running off his prime thoroughbred stock," Packard declared. "Ganging up on his riders and other workmen, beating them up, chasing them out of the country. Burning his line shacks, cutting his fences, blasting his irrigation ditches, threatening his wife and children."

Bob Pryor nodded somberly. "Both the poor sheepman and the rich marquis seem to need our help, Celestino."

Mireles smiled brightly. "We keel two birds weeth one stone, General."

They talked some more over the whisky and cigars, in warm, easy friendliness, deciding that while here Pryor should use the name of Price, and that Mireles be known as Chico.

The Rio Kid and his partner were about to leave, when the door opened and a stocky young rancher entered, thick glasses glimmering, prominent teeth bared beneath a ragged mustache in a square homely face. In spite of his odd appearance, something about the man commanded respect and consideration.

"Hello, Teddy," said Packard, with his sincere winning smile, and introduced the man as Teddy Roosevelt, owner of the Maltese Cross.

Roosevelt shook hands, slightly awkward, half-shy and very polite, his eyes blinking at Pryor with puzzled interest. Then he turned abruptly to Packard.

"What's the matter with de Mores, Pack? Doesn't he know I'm on his side? At least, in this matter of Overbaugh. They call him the Crazy Frenchman, and maybe he is. He wants to meet me in a six-gun duel now!"

Packard laughed softly. "The Marquis thinks you're against him, like everyone else. He's encountered so much hostility he thinks everybody in the world's turned on him, Teddy. Offer to fight him with rifles. You're good with a Winchester, while de Mores favors hand-guns."

"I'm not certain I like de Mores

much," Roosevelt said. "But I'm for the underdog, even if he's got more gold than Midas."

"De Mores hasn't got the Midas touch, Teddy" protested Packard. "He's too much of a drifter and adventurer; he loves excitement more than luxury. The Marquis will go broke here. You wait and see."

Pryor and Mireles excused themselves and left the office.

CHAPTER II

Soiree in the Senate

RECROSSING the river to Little Missouri, a bleak, crude town compared to the well-kept streets and buildings of Medora, the Rio Kid and Mireles stabled their horses in the barn of the Keno Corral and took a room in the Western House. After shaving, washing up and changing clothes, they had supper in the hotel dining room. As they ate, the proprietor, Pete Malloy, regaled them with lurid and bawdy anecdotes while trying to discover their purpose in visiting the Badlands.

Malloy was frank and open in his dislike of Overbaugh, sheep, and the Marquis de Mores. A staunch supporter of Luke Breason, he bragged considerably about the gun-slinging prowess of Luke and his Bible hands. Next to Breason, who was "ugly-looking enough to scare a bull out of the breeding pen," Malloy declared that smooth, slick Cape Mifflin and wicked little Ace Adair were quickest and surest with their Colts, but Kid Madrid and Piper Rabb were not to be sneezed at, by any means. And Malloy had seen big Hash Creswell beat one man to death with his bare hands, and break another's back like a rotten stick. Creswell could outwrestle a grizzly, and knocked a steer down with one blow of his fist. Pete Malloy was proud of them.

It was a relief to get away from the hotel man and wander about the board walks under the bleached sagging overhangs of false-fronted business places. Where Medora had been quiet and orderly, Little Missouri was loud, brash and unruly, swarming with gunmen and gamblers, trappers and buffalo hunters, cowboys, rustlers and freighters, drifters and fugitives.

Pryor and Mireles dropped into the Pioneer Saloon for a quick one, then went on roving until they came upon horses wearing the Bible iron, at the hitch-rail in front of the Senate Saloon. It boasted the finest bar in Little Missouri, as well as a billiard and pool hall. Finding an unoccupied pool table, Pryor and Mireles began a leisurely game, dividing their attention between it and the Bible riders at the long bar.

An onlooker discreetly identified the Bible men for them.

Hash Creswell was a hulking brute, who looked capable of everything Malloy had said about him. Ace Adair, thin, wizened and waspish, had the arrogance of a small man made large by the guns he wore. Piper Rabb was short, plump and squat, harmless and jovial in appearance, his round red face beaming good-naturedly over the beer mug. Cape Mifflin looked clean cool and supremely self-assured, pleasant-faced, soft-spoken and well-dressed, the quiet type of killer. Kid Madrid was a slim merry youngster with a wild, reckless laugh and insolent dark eyes, a nice-looking boy except for that contemptuous swaggering way of his.

Pryor and Mireles, studying them covertly, estimated each one and filed him away for future reference. The Bible had a formidable array of talent there, without question. The Rio Kid had seen enough real hardcases to know.

Celestino Mireles was exulting over a clever shot, when their informant sucked in his breath with surprise, muttering:

"Overbaugh! What's that sheepman doing in here? He must be crazy or sick of living!"

Bob Pryor turned and saw a broad, portly man walk into the smoke-layered room. Odin Overbaugh, with mild eyes in a bland florid face, meek and unobtrusive for all of his great girth, wearing no gunbelt tonight.

The Bible crew did not see him at first, but there was tension in the Senate.

It increased three-fold as another and quite different man entered, and the Rio Kid knew without being told that here was the Marquis de Mores. He had that air about him, that princely flair of bearing and manner, a tall, muscular Frenchman with curly black hair an upturned mustache waxed to needle points, and clear carved features that bespoke a background of noble blood and high lineage.

He wore a flat-crowned hat at a rakish angle, a flame-colored bandanna of the finest silk, a fringed buckskin shirt, and tailored breeches tucked into boots of rich, soft leather. Like Overbaugh, he was unarmed, undoubtedly a safeguard against overwhelming numbers. Even the most ruthless killers would not shoot a weaponless man in this country.

BEFORE de Mores reached the bar, Hash Creswell spotted Overbaugh and moved toward him with a jeering laugh.

"I smell sheep, fat man," Creswell said loudly. "And sheep stink like sheepherders. Get out before I throw you out, you fat stinking clown!"

"I got a right here," Overbaugh protested. "I like my beer as well as the next man."

"Try some of this then," laughed Creswell.

Lifting a full mug off the counter, he dashed its contents into the sheepman's face. As Overbaugh stumbled backward, blinded and drenched, Hash Creswell slapped a great open hand back and forth across the man's wide, dripping cheeks. Overbaugh's arms came up, heavy and clumsy and Creswell closed his fists and slugged him twice, sinking the first into the belly, lifting the second to the chin. Overbaugh reeled back against the rear wall, lurched forward, and fell flat on his face.

Hash Creswell was going after Overbaugh, when de Mores's voice caught and turned him around with a cool, even warning:

"Leave him alone, monsieur."

"Well, if it ain't the fancy Frog himself!" rumbled Creswell. "Where's your shooting iron, Frenchy? You're getting soft, like Overbaugh."

"Neither soft nor foolish," de Mores said. "I'll face any one man with a gun, but not an entire squadron."

"Back down and blow away then, Froggy," said Hash Creswell. "I'm going to boot some sense into this here fat sheep tick."

He started on toward the man sprawled at the base of the wall, but de Mores grasped one massive corded shoulder and hauled Creswell back around to face him. Creswell grunted and swung, fast for a big man, knocking the Frenchman's hat off and jolting his curly head far back.

Creswell moved in to finish him, striking swift and hard but the Marquis ducked and dodged away from the follow-up punches, light and quick on his feet. Creswell cursed and launched another crushing blow, but it never landed. With all the limber grace of a cancan dancer, and a great deal more power and authority, de Mores delivered a sudden French-style kick to the jaw that snapped Creswell's shaggy head and dropped him heavily on his shoulders in the sawdust. The other Bible riders moved in at once, swarming over de Mores from behind, grappling and beating him floorward. All told there were eight of them, crowding and jostling to get a crack at the Marquis with their fists or boots.

Bystanders were flattened, tables and chairs overturned, crashing, and house-

men stood helplessly by, reluctant to raise a hand against the Bible gunmen. De Mores tried to fight back, but he was overwhelmed and buried under that snarling wolf-pack. Wood and glassware splintered, percentage girls screamed, and brawling men panted and swore in the surging strife.

The Rio Kid broke his cue stick over one knee, dropping the smaller felt-tipped end and gripping the loaded butt. Celestino Mireles instantly did the same, and they charged into the tangled welter of bodies, clubbing at hostile heads and shoulders. Men dropped, groaning or cowered away bleeding under the flailing sticks, as Pryor and Mireles slashed and battered their way through to the core of the turmoil.

Cape Mifflin turned to meet them, hands flashing to his holsters, but the Rio Kid rammed him backward and clubbed him down across the brass rail at the foot of the bar. Another Bible man leaped at Pryor's back, but a lightning stroke from Mireles laid him flat in the wreckage of a table.

Little Ace Adair had de Mores from behind, a strangle-hold locked under the chin, a bony knee grinding into the spine, while Kid Madrid lashed away at the Marquis's face, and Piper Rabb sledged at stomach and groin. De Mores was still writhing and struggling on the floor, but Adair clung leechlike to his back, choking him and twisting his neck, and the Frenchman's efforts were ebbing under that punishment.

PRYOR clouted Adair on the skull and tore him off de Mores's back, flinging him across the floorboards in a long slithering slide that upset men and furniture. Rabb came up lunging at Mireles, but the Mexican hammered him face-down in the debris. Kid Madrid was straightening, and reaching for his guns when Pryor's pool stick caught him across the brow and sent him skidding on the back of his neck.

A heavy body landed on the Rio Kid's back, hands clawing at his face and throat. Pryor ducked and heaved mightily, hurling the man on over his head and across the bar, carrying bottles and glasses and one bartender down with him behind the counter. Another opponent slugged at Mireles from the rear, but Celestino came spinning about and jabbed the cue butt deep into the cowboy's waistline. As the fellow doubled up, Celestino chopped down on his head, and another Bible face gouged the filthy sawdust.

Surprisingly, the Marquis de Mores was up under his own power, his features crimsoned and dripping blood but the curly head still proud and high. Overbaugh staggered forward to join the Marquis, and Hash Creswell reared up to make a pass at the sheepman, but Bob Pryor stepped in and whipped the loaded butt of the pool stick across the giant's face, slamming him back and down at the base of the bar.

Then, as dazed and groggy Bible hands groped for their holsters, guns leaped clear in the left fists of Pryor and Mireles, and the Rio Kid's voice ordered with calm crisp emphasis:

"That's enough, boys. The party's all over. We're walking out, and you're standing right where you are. The first man who reaches is dead."

De Mores and Overbaugh headed for the doorway, with Pryor and Mireles backing slowly after them, dropping the broken cues and drawing their right-hand Colts. The Senate was tense, hushed except for the sobbing moans of injured men, and nobody stirred under the menacing muzzles of the two strangers who had befriended the two outcasts of the Badlands.

"Who's paying for them busted cues?" demanded the pool hall man.

Bob Pryor smiled way to his blue eyes, a handsome devil-may-care smile that left the onlookers awed and chilled.

"Charge them to the Bible," he said gently. "Bible started this ruckus."

He paused inside the batwings, guns poised easily; Mireles slim, dark and smiling, was at his side. The interior

Creswell grunted and bowed under the steel

remained a frozen tableau beneath their guns. Pryor and his *compadre* backed out through the swing doors after de Mores and Overbaugh.

"To whom are we indebted?" inquired the Marquis, outside on the slat walk. "My name is de Mores and this is Odin Overbaugh."

"A couple of drifting riders," Bob Pryor said. "I'm Price and this is Chico."

"Why did you come to our assistance?" asked de Mores, as they shook hands all around. "Our side is not the popular one here."

"We like to see the odds fairly even," Pryor told him.

"We are grateful," the Marquis said, in clear, cultured tones. "In return I offer you the hospitality of Chateau de Mores. It's just across the river outside of Medora."

"Thanks, but we have rooms in the Western House."

"You will rest much better—and safer—in my home, gentlemen."

"Maybe you're right," conceded Pryor.

"He sure is, boys," put in Overbaugh. "Anybody that sides us ain't safe in Little Missouri. You're welcome at the Double O, too, if you can stand sheep

and rough quarters. But Mark here can offer a lot more."

"Pick up your things and come on home with me, gentlemen." The Marquis stepped out beside a magnificent palomino, removed a gunbelt from the saddle-bags and buckled it about his trim, flat waist. "Ah, I feel much better," he murmured, shifting the sheath into place on his right thigh and slipping the ivory-handled Colt out and into the leather. "You will not regret it. And if you are looking for work, I could employ two men like yourselves—at very good wages."

"Well, all right," said the Rio Kid.

THINGS were working out to perfection so far. Already they had gained entry to the Chateau de Mores and the Double O sheep ranch, and won the full confidence of the men they had come here to protect against aggression.

De Mores had a pleasant charm and natural friendliness, which made him instantly likable. He seemed to be sincere, straightforward and fearless, a man with absolute faith in himself, who loved adventure and hated oppression. A highborn aristocrat, as Packard had told them, yet a man without pretense or artifice, conceit or arrogance. A gallant and talented fighting man from France.

The Marquis de Mores, except for his wealth and polished refinement, was much like the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles themselves.

Pete Malloy, the hotel proprietor, had already heard about the free-for-all in the Senate. When Pryor and Mireles checked out of the hotel, he said, "You boys better head back where you come from. Your days are numbered here. Stay around Little Missouri, you're as good as dead and buried right now."

They rode out unmolested. The Bible gunnies were still licking their wounds and drowning their shame in Senate whisky.

They crossed the stream and turned southward to escort Overbaugh home safely. Moonlight shimmered on the river and silvered the sagebrush. The odor of sheep came on the breeze, as they neared the ranch.

"They do stink some," Overbaugh said. "But I never had no luck with beef. My wife's old man gave us the sheep when we was down and out. I figured maybe we could get by here. Didn't know about Breason when we moved in."

The Double O wasn't much of a layout; ramshackle and already run-down and decrepit. In the log house, Overbaugh introduced his wife and brought out some beer. Four small children tumbled about at play on the floor, and tired, dumpy Mrs. Overbaugh was apologetic about the noise they made. She was a shy, kindly woman, worn from childbirth and toil and worry, but still sturdy and capable. They would have been a happy family had it not been for the ominous shadow of Bible hanging always over their heads.

"One herder's out on watch while the other sleeps," Overbaugh said. "All you need is dogs and a man or two to herd sheep. One man and a dog can move two thousand sheep, where it takes ten-twelve riders and sixty horses to drive that many cattle. And sheep'll eat good where cattle would starve. Nobody else wanted this tract—until we claimed it. Life and people are funny propositions, I reckon."

"Maybe we ought to stay here tonight," Bob Pryor suggested.

"No, you go on home with Mark," said Overbaugh. "The Bible bunch ain't ready to hit us yet. Luke Breason's away somewheres."

"Well, we'll be around for a while," Pryor told him. "In case you need us."

"I'm obliged again, friend," Overbaugh said. "Men like you two and Mark here put new heart in a feller. A man gets a lonesome feeling at times, standing practically alone between his family and whatever it is threatening 'em."

They finished their beer, said good night to the Overbaughs, and cantered north toward the lights of Medora.

CHAPTER III

Queen of the Badlands

THE Chateau, a grand two-story mansion of twenty-eight rooms, stood on a broad open terrace over the eastern shore of the Little Missouri River, with dark forests and rough, barren mountains in the background. A delicate fanlight arched above the entrance.

The interior was lavishly furnished with Oriental rugs and drapes, Sheraton furniture, cut-glass chandeliers, and marble fireplaces. On the walls, covered with hand-blocked wallpaper from France, hung great Adamesque mirrors and ancestral portraits.

Here Medora, the Marquise de Mores, presided over a household of servants including a butler, governess, nurse, coachman, gardener, laundress, several maids and cooks.

Awaking in soft white beds, in a room of sumptuous elegance, the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles watched the sunlight flood in through the tall windows and wash the floor and walls with pure gold. Both had seen similar rooms in the past, but not on the Western frontier. A man could grow soft and lazy, living like this, Bob Pryor reflected, but there was no sign of softness in de Mores.

They bathed, shaved again, dressed as best they could in their worn range garb, and descended to breakfast with their host. The Marquise, whom they had met last night, was not down yet. She had been warm and gracious, rather than cold and haughty. The cowboys called her, "Queen of the Badlands," but she was certainly a human and benevolent queen.

After a fine breakfast, they found their horses saddled and waiting in the yard, and they rode out with de Mores to inspect some of his thoroughbred herds of horses and cattle. The Marquis had fenced parts of his range, to protect his breeding stock, and this increased the resentment against him, of course. Open range cattlemen abhorred fences.

As they rode in toward the packing plant on the outskirts of Medora, de Mores described his dream of empire with infectious boyish enthusiasm.

"Swift of Chicago—Gustavus Franklin Swift—introduced the use of refrigerator cars for shipping meat long distances by rail. His plan was to slaughter cattle at their point of origin, and save enough in shipping costs to undersell all competitors. A smart man, that Chicago meat-packer."

De Mores smiled and gestured at the large buildings of his own packing house.

"I decided to go even farther than that, and beat Swift at his own game. I shall do my own packing here, eliminate the meat-packing middleman, ship and sell directly from the range to the consumer. That way I can undersell Swift. Medora's father financed me, and I organized the ten-million-dollar Northern Pacific Refrigerator Car Company. In a few years it will put Gus Swift out of business."

Bob Pryor shook his head, with a slow sad smile. "I wouldn't count too much on that, Marquis. Nobody'll ever put Gus Swift out of business. He's a genius in his field, with unlimited wealth and resources behind him. Your idea sounds good, but Swift will find a way to better it and use it to his own advantage."

De Mores was undaunted, unperturbed. "Well, I can try, can't I? Most of the fun is in the trying. I always enjoyed the battle itself more than the victory."

"But in this case, it could ruin you financially," Pryor said.

The Marquis shrugged eloquently. "So? My father-in-law will make enough and more in some other line to cover his losses. And myself, I will never stay

rich long anyway. I prefer spending to accumulating money."

"Why all this industry then?" asked Pryor, beginning to wonder if de Mores could be a bit unbalanced, in a pleasant, charming way.

"It is like a game, a gamble," the Frenchman said, laughing softly. "If I am not fighting a war somewhere, I must be doing something else for excitement. If I cannot risk my life, I have to risk my money. Here in the Badlands, I am doubly fortunate, for I can do both at the same time!" His laughter was gay and lilting.

"But the Marquise—if you'll pardon me?"

"She worships neither wealth nor success," de Mores said, with quiet dignity. "She has had both all of her life. She likes being married to me, and raising our children."

BOB PRYOR said, "You're a fortunate man, Marquis."

"In some ways, the most fortunate of men," de Mores said. "In others, the most blighted and accursed."

The packing plant was modern, efficient, well-manned, as clean and sanitary as such places can be, but the Rio Kid could see it foredoomed to failure. De Mores should have stuck to raising beef, and let Swift do the packing and selling.

After examining a string of refrigerator cars on the Marquis's sidetrack of the Northern Pacific, they left the slaughterhouse to reek behind and rode into town. De Mores showed them through the fashionable hotel, the smart theater, and the well-equipped clubhouse he had built for his riders, butchers, and all employees.

There was something a shade fantastic about the whole elaborate setup, Bob Pryor realized. The Marquis had created a town, a dream world of his own, which had little if any basis in solid reality. But there was no denying the man's magnetic charm, his essential goodness of heart and mind.

A half-dozen vagabonds accosted him on the street, and de Mores handed money to each of them. There was nothing bountiful or condescending in his manner.

"I know what it is to be penniless," he said simply. "If a dollar will restore a man's self-respect for even a short time, it does some good and is little enough to give."

Once de Mores excused himself to visit the house of a young widow, whose husband had been shot from ambush while riding line for the Marquis—presumably by snipers from the Bible. The Rio Kid smiled at Mireles.

"That woman and her child will be taken care of, as long as de Mores has a dime."

"Wheech may not be too long, General," said Mireles. "Thees Frenchman has a heart beeg as the sky. He weel geeve as long as he's got. He weel never die rich, that is for sure."

"Why should a man like de Mores be hated here?" wondered Pryor. "Because he is French, good-looking and gentlemanly and brave, and his wife is beautiful and rich?"

"*Quien sabé?*" murmured Celestino Mireles. "For many things, that question ees the only answer, General *mío*. And another good man ees hated for raising sheep instead of cows."

When de Mores rejoined them, they stopped in at the *Badlands Cowboy* to talk with Packard, who was happy to see them and took down their version of the fracas in the Senate the evening before, for publication in his paper.

"Bible hands will burn this place down around your ears, Pack," warned de Mores.

"Well, I need a new office and plant anyway," Packard said, grinning through his spade beard. "Wish I'd seen that roughhouse myself."

"You would have been right in the middle of it," said de Mores. "And I told you, Pack, I'd set you up in a brand-new plant any time you'd let me."

"This does the job, Mark," said Pack-

ard. "And you've got enough on your charity list already."

They spent the afternoon riding around the de Mores range. After a delightful dinner in the Chateau that evening, the Marquis and Mireles went for a stroll. Bob Pryor found himself alone with the Marquise on the porch.

Medora von Hoffman de Mores was a superb figure of young womanhood, as charming and romantic as her husband, and Pryor found her fragrant nearness disturbing and exciting. She wore her

CELESTINO MIRELES

rich dark tresses piled in a mass of burnished curls above the pure queenly forehead, deep dark eyes, and proud straight nose. Her gracious mouth curved, full and lush, above a firm chin and clean strong jawline.

"You are more than an aimless drifter, Mr. Price," she declared, her voice low and musical.

"I'm afraid not, ma'am," Pryor said.

"You've seen military service, I believe?"

"A long while ago."

MEDORA insisted, "The look is still on you. Perhaps because you've lived so much in the saddle—and with guns. I can tell a fighting man, Mr. Price. I married one. Wouldn't want any other kind."

"In this country, they're needed some," Pryor admitted.

"I hope you and your Spanish friend will stay here," Medora said. "We are going to need men like you. Antoine cannot stand alone against the Bible. His riders are not gunmen, and his few friends are not real fighting men—not with guns, against professionals."

"We'll be around for a time, ma'am."

"There's something else I'm afraid of, too— Oh, I wish I knew who you really are, whether I can trust you fully! Somehow, it's an odd thing, but I have the strange feeling that you might have come here to help us. I don't know why."

"Perhaps we did," Pryor said. "We have helped folks, here and there."

Medora leaned toward him, staring straight and deep into his eyes. "Who are you? What is your real name? It can't be Price! Why did you come here? I can't tell you—all I have to tell—unless I know, for certain."

He gave up resisting the insistent compulsion to reveal the truth to this lovely lady. There was no harm in telling her and de Mores and Overbaugh anyway.

"Robert Pryor," he said. "One-time captain of Union cavalry. Lately a rover of Western trails."

Her eyes widened. "Bob Pryor—the Rio Kid!" she cried softly. "I knew, I knew you were *somebody*, someone out of the ordinary. And that young Mexican is Mireles, your partner, of course."

"What is it you have to tell me, Marquise?"

"I'll make it brief, before they return. Antoine might not approve— He is in line for the French throne, Captain Pryor. He hoped to make enough money from beef to finance a revolution and restore the monarchy in France, with himself as king. A wild, far-flung idea, at best, but it appeals to my husband, as you may understand. I've never taken it too seriously, but some people in France

apparently do. I fear—have reasons to believe, in fact, that assassins from the French Republic have been sent to America to murder the Marquis!"

"It is possible," Pryor said. "They do things like that in Europe."

"It's more than just possible, Captain," said Medora. "I've had authentic letters of warning from friends in Paris. People who can be trusted. And the assassins will have no trouble tracing us here. Every move we make is charted in the New York papers."

"We'll have to watch for two French killers then, along with the local gunmen."

"You and Mireles will stay then? Until it is settled?"

"We always do," Bob Pryor said, with an easy smile.

"One more thing, Captain," she went on. "We feel for the Overbaughs. They need and deserve help much more than we do. Your first duty should be to protect them."

"I agree, Marquise," said Pryor. "The Overbaughs have been trampled on all their lives. I'm gratified to find a lady of your level who doesn't believe that certain lower classes were made to be trodden over and enslaved."

The warm brightness of Medora's smile was dazzling. "I've always been democratic, Captain. And I've learned a lot more about genuine democracy from a certain French Royalist."

When the other two men returned from their moonlight walk, Pryor revealed to de Mores the true identity of himself and Mireles. The Marquis laughed in delight.

"No one keeps secrets from my Medora, *n'est-ce pas?* But I must confess I had suspected you were the Rio Kid and his Spanish comrade. You are more welcome than ever here, gentlemen." He raised Medora from her chair with tender strength. "Come, *ma cherie,* for a last good night to the little ones—You will pardon us, please?"

Arm in arm like an entranced pair of young lovers, they went into the chateau to put their son and daughter to bed. The children were as handsome as their parents, Pryor had observed.

Celestino Mireles sighed wistfully. "Don't you ever weesh for a wife and family, General? A beautiful one like that, weeth a dowry of three meellion dollars?"

"No, I'm too busy, amigo," said Bob Pryor. "We have too much territory to cover. We're always on the warpath, and fighting braves don't always bring their squaws."

But he was lying a little. A woman like Medora made a single man aware of the loneliness and emptiness in his life, and the three million had nothing to do with it.

CHAPTER IV

On the Owlhoot Trail

IN THE blackness before dawn, the Rio Kid awakened to the onrushing drum of hoofs in the outer dark. His first thought was that Luke Breason had returned and was leading an open attack on the chateau. Then he decided that even the Bible outfit wouldn't be that rash in flouting law and order.

De Mores was already up and stirring about somewhere in the great house. Pryor stepped out of bed, picked up his gunbelt, and moved to one of the high, wide windows. In a moment Mireles was at the next window, yawning and stretching, revolver in hand.

The yard below was filled with riders on lathered horses, milling about and kicking up dust, and a hoarse voice was calling for the Marquis. Light spilled from the entrance into the yard, and de Mores emerged out of the gallery in a silk dressing gown, lamp in left hand, sawed-off shotgun under his right arm.

In the flickering yellow light, Pryor recognized the ranch manager, Duval, with de Mores's riders at his back. The words floated up over the chopping of hoofs:

"—killed two nighthawks and ran off the herd on the northwest range. The tracks head toward Montana. Left three men on the trail. The boys are getting fresh horses ready, and the cook's packing grub. Do we ride, Antoine?"

"As soon as we're dressed here," de Mores said. "Good work, Duval. Are the men who brought the word with you?"

"Yes, they're here. Sawtooth and Idaho rode in."

"They'll stay here to guard the chateau," said de Mores. "We'll leave a few more men at the ranch. The rest of us will ride out."

Upstairs, Pryor and Mireles had a lamp glowing and were already dressing rapidly. A few minutes later they met de Mores downstairs, gulped down some hot coffee, and moved out into the yard. Half an hour afterward, the heavily-armed posse was ready to leave the ranch, when the rataplan of hoofbeats rolled up from the south. A lone rider was coming at a breakneck pace in the graying darkness.

It proved to be Overbaugh on a jaded, blowing cayuse. The rustlers had struck at the Double O also. The sheep were gone, and one herder and several dogs were dead. The other herder had stayed behind to guard the family. The tracks led in the direction of Montana, and it looked as if the same bunch of rustlers had pulled both raids.

"You want to come with us, Odin?" asked de Mores.

"You're damn right I do!" growled Overbaugh. "Them sheep and cattle are all heading for the same place."

De Mores nodded, ordered a fresh mount saddled for Overbaugh, and dispatched three riders southward to join the herder at the Double O.

"If the rustlers are from Montana they're homeward bound," he said thoughtfully. "If they're from the Bible, they won't give themselves away by hitting our homes. Not immediately, at any rate. So I think it's safe enough to leave skeleton guards behind here, and utilize our main force in pursuit." He glanced at Pryor for confirmation.

"I believe you're right, Marquis," said the Rio Kid.

"Call me Mark, Bob," said de Mores, with a grin. "That's the name Packard gave me. I feel foreign enough in this country without being addressed by that title. And Antoine sounds too much like a head waiter—except when Medora uses it."

They were well out on the trail when the rising sun inflamed the eastern horizon. By mid-morning they found the trace of the sheep herd paralleling that of the cattle, as the riders had more or less predicted. At noon they reached the line shack of the northwest tract, where the blanket-wrapped bodies of the two cowboys, Baldy and Kansas, had been left. De Mores detailed a crew to pause long enough to dig temporary graves, and the main party pushed on with gaunt, grim faces and stormy, slitted eyes.

Midway through the afternoon it appeared certain that the stock was being driven toward the Montana border. Lawlessness had been prevalent there of late, and the ranchers had organized a Vigilance Committee to defend their herds and run down the bandits. Cattle and horse thieves were hung without ceremony in Montana, their bodies left dangling and placarded with warnings to other outlaws.

POSSIBLY Granville Stuart and his Vigilantes had forced the rustlers to seek sources outside of Montana, which might account for this large-scale raid on Badlands beef and mutton. But Pryor still had a hunch that Luke Breason and the Bible crew were involved, because the losses had been inflicted on Breason's particular enemies—Overbaugh and de Mores.

Reading sign at the point of the column, the Rio Kid led the pursuit into a broad valley, floored with bunchgrass, greasewood and sage, indented by red sandstone washings from the surrounding uplands. In places the buffalo grass was stained brilliantly with buttercups, verbena and cowslips in spring blossom. Bluebells grew in sheltered nooks. Ridges clothed with blue spruce rimmed the plain on either side, and beyond them rose slopes of silvery aspens and dark pine forests.

On a stretch of hardpan, Pryor noticed the faint divergence of horse prints to the left. Next he spotted more tracks branching off into a rocky creek bed in the same direction. Farther on, he discovered other signs along an outcropping ledge that extended left from the trail.

His suspicions of the Bible strengthened the theory that some of the rustlers were leaving the herd and turning back toward the Little Missouri. By dropping out one or two at a time, they were trying to obscure their tracks and mask the maneuver. Only an expert veteran tracker like the Rio Kid could have read those scant signs in the trampled area left by a trail herd.

After conferring with Mireles, de Mores, Duval and Overbaugh, Bob Pryor decided to scout the southern edge of the valley and determine what had become of the horsemen who had detached themselves from the main group.

"If I find them turning back toward the Badlands, I'll follow them alone," Pryor said. "The rest of you keep on after the herd. If the trail leads you into Montana, get in touch with Granville Stuart, the head of the Vigilance Committee there. He might remember me, if you mention my name to him."

Mireles and de Mores wanted to accompany Pryor, but he shook them off. "This is a job for one man. You'll need every gun available when you catch up with the rustlers."

"What do you make of this, Kid?" asked de Mores.

"I'd say that the Bible has joined hands with Montana rustlers to strike at you and Overbaugh, Mark. That way Breason can throw all the blame onto the Montana gang, in case you call in a Federal marshal."

The Rio Kid saluted and wheeled Saber, his big, powerful dun charger, away to the left of the de Mores cavalcade. Scouring the southern perimeter of the lowlands, he finally found where the scattered riders had regathered.

Their prints ran back in a southeasterly course toward the Little Missouri country. The Bible without a doubt, he thought, and settled down in the hot leather to ride out his lone trail, with Saber hitting an easy steady ground-eating gait. Once well clear of the herd, these men had made little or no effort to conceal their tracks, and he read the sign as easily as reading a book.

He made much better time alone, and by twilight he was passing herds of cattle wearing the Bible brand. The dusk deepened and grew, the sagebrush purple in the fading light. It was full night when he came within sight of the Bible Ranch.

On a wooded hilltop, Pryor unsaddled and rubbed down his horse, and made a cold dry meal from his saddle-bags, while waiting for moon rise. He didn't care to invade this unfamiliar terrain until he had some light to guide him.

It was dangerous, perhaps foolhardy, to venture into enemy headquarters, but the Rio Kid thought he might learn enough there to make it worthwhile. The Bible had ruled the region for so long, that no one would be expecting any uninvited visitors on the home spread. This laxity, born of supremacy and overconfidence, should be all to an invader's advantage.

WHEN the moon came up it was almost too big and bright, a great golden searchlight over the eastern ramparts, paling as it ascended the heavens and dimmed the nearer stars. Well, if they jumped him in there, he

could pretend ignorance, claim he'd lost his way, didn't know where he was.

But after that jamboree in the Senate, they weren't apt to believe him. He would probably take a fearful beating, if he was caught trespassing on Bible property.

He threw on the blanket, double-rigged saddle and gear, buckling straps and tightening cinches with care. Stepping into the leather he quartered down the hillside, threaded through buckbrush, and rode in under the white-tufted cottonwoods along the creek that watered the spread. The plaintive call of a whippoorwill sounded from a stand of junipers.

The Bible spread looked shoddy and ill-kempt, in comparison to the de Mores ranch, yet it was a large and extensive layout with many buildings scattered about. A horse nickered, but Saber did not answer. A dog barked, and Pryor thought of the sheep dogs slain at Overbaugh's. Studying the spread as he approached it, he picked out the long bunkhouse and adjacent cookshack, the big barn surrounded by corrals and sheds, a blacksmith shop, storehouse, and the ranch house.

Leaving Saber behind the outer row of sheds, the Rio Kid walked in through a jumble of outbuildings, wagons and equipment. Supper was long since over. Accordion music and voices issued from the bunkhouse windows, and a clang on iron came from the blacksmith's forge. Accompanied by the accordion and guitar, men's voices began singing, *Hell Among the Yearlin's.*

Pryor circled to the rear of the ranch house, and crept toward the only lighted windows there.

It looked like an office. A huge, brawny man with an ugly, bitter face, undoubtedly Luke Breason himself, sat beside a massive rolltop desk, chewing an outsized cigar and talking with two neat, dapper, foreign-looking men. The sight of this dark-visaged pair made Pryor's back muscles twitch, and sent a chilling prickle along his spine. They had a European suaveness, probably French.

Pryor thought, The assassins have arrived from France. Medora was right.

Then he saw a fourth man lounging beside the doorway with languid grace. The cool, immaculate Cape Mifflin, fully relaxed and at ease, a dreamy look on his pleasant tanned features, the low-slung guns incongruous on his lean flanks.

The Rio Kid slid closer to catch the voices through the open window. Breason was speaking in deep authoritative tones, the voice of a man accustomed to command.

"You don't care who kills him then? Just so long as he dies? Is that right, Cretain?"

"That is correct, m'sieu. Our mission is to leave him dead." The speaker was broad and squat, with a blunt squashed-looking face and a gold-toothed grin. Cretain—Pryor would remember him.

"You agree, Lenaude?" asked Breason, as if it didn't matter much one way or another.

"It is of no moment how he dies," said Lenaude, a thin, wiry little man with bored overbred features and weary pouched eyes. "But if we kill him, you will have no trouble with the law, m'sieu."

Luke Breason laughed. "I never have any trouble with the law."

"You might, Luke, if they brought in a U.S. Marshal," said Cape Mifflin casually.

Breason frowned at his lieutenant. "I know that, Cape. The idea is to let the Frenchies take the blame, while we get the satisfaction ourselves. These Frenchman *want* to get credit for the killing. We just want to kill the man."

"Sure, Luke," drawled Mifflin indifferently.

"We use them like we used the boys from Montana, see?"

"Nobody uses us, m'sieu, but the Republic," said Lenaude, with icy restraint.

Breason laughed, and beamed at his expressionless guests. "I didn't mean

that the way it sounded, boys." He reached for a bottle and glasses. "Let's have a snort here. We're in this together, we all want the same thing. Drink up and I'll call in those pretty girls we got for you."

LENAUDE shrugged expressively, contempt in his haughty refined face. "You need us perhaps. We do not need you at all. If our opportunity comes first, the man will die then and there. We are not here to bargain and play games, m'sieu."

Luke Breason, smiling with forced joviality, thrust glasses at them. "We'll get along all right, don't worry. We'll work out something that'll satisfy you as well as ourselves. Now these little girls we've got are—"

Bob Pryor turned away in disgust, fighting down the urge to draw and open fire on them all right here. He had never heard men talk of murder with such cold-blooded dispassion and inhuman calmness. As if they were talking about slaughtering a sick steer or a broken-legged horse.

He retraced his way through the outlying sheds toward the last fringe of structures. Rounding the final corner, he came face to face with the hulking Hash Creswell and plump Piper Rabb, leering at him over leveled gun-barrels.

"Imagine meeting you again, friend, and right here at home," jeered Creswell. "Drop that belt and don't grab nothing but the buckle, unless you want a bellyful of hot lead. We got a little job to do before we turn you in to the boss. Ain't we, Piper?"

"Sure have, Hash," said Rabb, a gloating smirk on his soft, fat countenance. "And he ain't got no cue stick in his paws tonight neither. I'm going to soften him up a mite with my gun-barrel."

"Give it to him good, Piper, but not too hard," Hash Creswell said. "Don't bust his head in. I want to work on him with my bare hands."

Piper Rabb strode forward and swung with sudden, amazing swiftness, and Bob Pryor's skull exploded into roaring shattered light. He was sinking earthward on jointless legs, his brain bursting and afire, when Hash Creswell's great fist smashed into his face with neck-snapping force.

CHAPTER V

Montana Justice

GRANVILLE STUART, one of Montana's most successful pioneer cattlemen, was a tall, distinguished gentleman from Virginia who had made the first gold strike in this territory in 1858. When de Mores's posse from Dakota arrived at the fine Stuart ranch, east of Judith Basin in eastern Montana, the former Virginian welcomed them with courtly grace. His handsome white-bearded face lighted up at mention of the name of Captain Robert Pryor, the Rio Kid.

Stuart promptly summoned his Vigilance Committee, to join in the pursuit of the stolen cattle and sheep. These men had hanged so many rustlers that they had become known as "Stuart's Stranglers." They operated with such efficiency that they occasionally permitted the names and dates of the executions of their next victims to be publicly known in advance. And the hangings came off as scheduled, even when the culprits were forewarned.

"We haven't had much rustling here recently," Granville Stuart said, in his slow soft-spoken manner. "I'm sorry to hear that the thieves have transferred their operations to the Dakotas. We'll be proud and happy indeed to help you run the rascals down, gentlemen. I don't like violence and killing, but it's the only way to deal with these bandits

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

TEDDY ROOSEVELT was born in New York, October 27, 1858. He was graduated from Harvard in 1880, and served in the New York State Legislature, 1881-84. He went West for his health, although he also had a natural bent for adventure, and raised beef cattle on the Maltese Cross Ranch, near Medora in the Little Missouri country of the Dakota Badlands. He went there for a hunting trip and stayed four years.

Scorned at first as a bespectacled tenderfoot, Roosevelt soon gained respect on the frontier for his courage, spirit, and growing handiness with horses and guns. When a drunken gunman insulted him in a saloon, Roosevelt knocked him out with one terrific punch. The boys said, "That four-eyed maverick has got plenty of sand in his craw, and don't forget it!"

From 1889 to 1895, Roosevelt was with the U.S. Civil Service Commission, and became New York Police Commissioner, 1895-97. In 1897-98 he was Assistant Secretary of the Navy. In the Spanish-American War, 1898, he organized and led the famous volunteer regiment known as the Rough Riders, recruited largely from the West, with a scattering of college athletes and sportsmen from the East. Their exploits around Santiago and San Juan Hill had much to do with defeating the Spanish forces in Cuba.

Roosevelt was governor of New York, 1898-1900, and Vice-President of the United States, 1901. On McKinley's death, Teddy became President, and was re-elected in 1904. He fought Big Business in a trust-busting campaign, preserved natural resources, and got pure-food laws passed. With his firm foreign policy—"Speak softly, and carry a big stick," he made the U.S. strong abroad, ended the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, and won the Nobel Peace Prize. Roosevelt went big-game hunting in Africa, exploring in Brazilian jungles, and wrote several books. He had four sons fighting in World War I, for which he had advocated preparedness and intervention, and his aviator-son, Quentin, was killed in action.

Theodore Roosevelt died on January 6, 1919, his death terminating one of the most active and colorful careers in the annals of American public life.

who laugh at the law of the land."

Stuart was pleased to meet de Mores, whom he knew by reputation, and Celestino Mireles, whom he'd heard of as the Rio Kid's partner. He inquired about Theodore Roosevelt and young Packard who was doing such excellent work with the *Badlands Cowboy.*

The Marquis de Mores said, "Mr. Stuart, I wish we could organize the Dakota ranchers the way you have these Montana stockmen. But they are too afraid of Luke Breason and the Bible crew to unite against the forces of evil."

"If all I hear about the Bible is true, Marquis, that outfit should be wiped off the face of the earth," Granville Stuart said. "If it gets too bad communicate with me, and I'll bring my Vigilantes to the Badlands. But if Captain Pryor is there, he'll probably do the job for you himself."

Stuart rode with them, still a dashing cavalier in spite of his age and white hair and beard. With Montana scouts and guides who knew every coulee and pocket in this area, they were soon closing in on the rustlers' hideout in the hills.

"They must have thought you wouldn't come this far," Stuart remarked. "Or that we wouldn't support you, once you got into Montana. But they're our problem as long as they make their headquarters here. And we'll be riding until they are all dead or gone.—I wish Pryor could have come with you. I'd like to see Robert again." He had the softest and gentlest of voices.

When the outlaw stronghold and the basin in which the stolen stock was kept had been located, Stuart and de Mores and their associates set about planning a campaign. Scouts reported that there were approximately forty of the rustlers, which meant that the opposing forces numbered about the same, since Stuart had added fifteen to de Mores's twenty-three riders.

The bandits' valley, sunken in the hills and buttes of wild, broken country, ran roughly north and south. Midway of the eastern side, a low shelf projected onto the plain, backed by a sheer redstone mesa. On this benchland, barricaded by logs and boulders, the desperadoes had built log houses and pole corrals.

With a few sharpshooting riflemen dispatched to the top of the mesa, a four-pronged attack was devised for the valley below. De Mores and Duval were to drive in from the flanks, and lay a crossfire on the fortified shelf, while Granville Stuart's detail waited for the opportune moment to launch a frontal assault. While this was going on, a mobile unit led by Overbaugh would strip the night watches off the herds and set the sheep and cattle in motion to the south.

The attack was to start at midnight, with the snipers opening fire from the rimrock above and behind the enemy camp.

STUART had selected Celestino Mireles to ride with him in the main offensive from the front. As the hour of midnight approached, these horsemen were waiting in the willows and cottonwoods that lined the creek in the center of the basin.

Behind them they heard the cattle stirring and rising, as was their custom at midnight. Before them the outlaw stronghold slumbered in darkness. A soft spring breeze brought the mournful singing voices of night-riders holding the herd, chanting such sad refrains as *Dinah Had a Wooden Leg* and *Saddle Ole Spike.*

Granville Stuart's noble white head shone in the branch-splintered moonlight, as he bent to examine his watch. Mireles, yawning with tension, rechecked his carbine and sixguns, and stroked the glossy mane of his black gelding. He had observed that Stuart, de Mores, Overbaugh and the rest knew their business, but he wished the Rio Kid was along just the same. It didn't seem quite right to be going into battle without the General.

Rifle fire from the heights split the night in the foreground, and from the rear came the gun blasts of Overbaugh's crew, and the abrupt surging thunder of stampeded stock. Slashing in from either side along the base of that great butte, the flankers of de Mores and Duval lashed that fortified bench with wicked crossfire.

Granville Stuart rose majestically into his saddle, and Mireles and the other men swung up behind him, awaiting the signal to move out. The men in the enemy camp rudely awakened, were shooting back now, but without much organization or direction. The outguards had gone down or fled for cover, under the raking fire of the Vigilantes.

Mireles could see flames stabbing from the log structures into the trees on either wing, which sheltered the riders of de Mores and Duval. The moon poured eerie light over the scene.

Stuart swung his arm and the column moved forward out of the cottonwoods and willows, deploying into a skirmish line and charging at a gallop toward the jutting bench. Hunched low, with Colts in both hands, Celestino Mireles saw gunfire torching at them from the ragged barrier in front of the log buildings. But to man those outer works, the rustlers had to expose themselves to fire from the flanks.

The enemy shooting slackened before Stuart's foragers struck the foot of the slope. Mireles felt the close whip of lead, bullets searing past his ears and tugging at his clothes. A rider vanished on Mireles's right, and a horse went plunging down at his left, but old Gran Stuart was still leading the way.

They drove up the grade and hurdled the barricade, flames leaping up at them before the bandits broke and scattered in panic. An explosion from below Mireles scorched his eyeballs as he threw down and blasted the man beneath the black's hoofs. De Mores was sweeping in from the left with guns ablaze, and Duval came hurtling in on the right. Caught in the three-pronged pincer movement, the outlaws fought and died in frenzied fury, or screamed and begged for quarter after casting away their weapons. Mireles shot a rustler down in a doorway, and clubbed another senseless against a log wall.

It was all over in a few minutes, with Stuart shouting, "Cease fire, men! They're trying to surrender."

Behind them dust stormed high across the valley from the stampeding sheep and cattle, and a few gunshots sounded flatly as Overbaugh went on running down and mopping up the night-herders. In the powder-reeking encampment, posse members were rounding up prisoners, checking the dead and wounded, cleaning out one final nest of opposition in a corner cabin.

De Mores was directing this action, ramming his mount right against the wall to pour fire through an open window. Mireles was spurring in that direction when two enemy riflemen rounded the rear corner and lined their barrels on the Marquis.

Celestino Mireles, driving on past de Mores's back, smashed straight into the two rustlers, his left-hand Colt blaring, almost shooting the head off the man on that side. But his right-hand gun clicked empty, and the other bandit was bringing his rifle up to blow the Mexican from his saddle. Leaning far out over the barrel, expecting a burst from the muzzle that would rip him apart, Mireles gunwhipped the man into the smoking soil, the rifle exploding skyward as Mireles raced past and wheeled his horse in a rearing turn.

DE MORES pumped a shot into that last rifleman and bowed smilingly from the saddle to Mireles.

"My thanks, Celestino. They had me cold."

"A pleasure, Mark." Mireles grinned. "Ees all over now maybe."

"Except for the hangings," de Mores said. "In which I take little pleasure."

"Me too," agreed Mireles. "Shooting ees much cleaner and queecker."

Stuart's Stranglers were already busy with ropes and nooses under the most convenient trees, and one of the captives was pleading for mercy.

"Luke Breason hired us to steal that stock in the Badlands! He sent up here for us. It's all Breason's doing, I'm telling you! You can't hang us hired hands and let Breason go free. Take us to jail, give us a chance!" He tore frantically at the noose on his neck.

"You're as guilty as Breason," said Granville Stuart. "You've been stealing and killing all your life, Muncrief. We'll attend to Breason in due time— String him up, boys."

The rope jerked over the limb, cutting off Muncrief's strangled shriek and lifting him well off the ground, twisting, turning and kicking in mid-air, his hands now tied behind his back. A second rustler was swung clear, twitching and writhing at the end of the rope, and then another.

Celestino Mireles and de Mores turned away from the gruesome spectacle in the shadow-etched moonbeams.

Overbaugh and his detail were riding up the slope toward them, and it was a relief to find they had suffered no casualties in stampeding the stock. Mireles smiled at the sight of Overbaugh's bulk.

All they cared about now was tending to their wounded and dead, rounding up the sheep and cattle, and driving the herds homeward, after expressing their gratitude to Stuart and the other Montana ranchers.

The thunder of runaway stock had ceased, along with the roaring gunfire, and the moonlit night was strangely hushed and still. Except for the rasp and creak of rope across wood, and the faint muffled sounds of men hanging and dying under the leafy boughs, the groans of the wounded.

And even as once more Celestino was wishing for the presence of his General, back at the Bible Ranch in Dakota where the Rio Kid had been discovered by enemy gunmen, he was falling backward from Hash Creswell's second crushing blow. And Piper Rabb struck again with his gun-barrel. The world turned bottomside up and split open into red roaring chaos.

Dimly Pryor felt the turf under his back, and saw the swimming, distorted shapes of the two Bible men in the moonlight. He tried to rise or roll away, but there was no response from his muscles. Shocked numb and nerveless, barely conscious, he lay there waiting for them to come in and finish the job with boots, fists and gun-barrels.

They were moving in on him when Saber came charging at them, snorting and trumpeting in rage, thrashing out with forelegs at the giant Creswell. Hash spun and dodged, but the hoofs caught him glancingly on one shoulder and knocked him spinning, fifteen feet away. Piper Rabb screamed and fled, narrowly missing being decapitated as Saber pivoted and lashed out with hind legs.

The Rio Kid groped in the grass for his gunbelt and clawed a Colt out of its sheath as Saber stood guard over him, snorting and panting, and all but breathing fire. Rabb had disappeared around the corner of the shed, but Creswell was scrambling groggily upright and hauling out his gun. Pryor leveled off and let go a shot, and Creswell dropped his weapon and lunged for the shelter of the shed.

Pryor fired again, clipping off splinters close to Creswell's head. Saber headed for the Bible men, but the Rio Kid called him back.

Rising with a supreme effort, finding the reins and stirrup, Bob Pryor hoisted himself into saddle, clinging to his belt and gun. Saber took off without urging, almost instantly in full stride, and Pryor turned and threw a couple more shots back as flame lanced after him from beside that shed. He thumbed off one more blast, and turned to his riding, a few more hasty shots whistling past in the darkness as he gained the cover of the trees along the stream.

THAT had been a close call all right. But for Saber, the Rio Kid's mission in the Badlands would have ended prematurely and disastrously. Out of handgun range, he holstered the gun and strapped the belt about his waist, unworried about pursuit now that he was aboard and Saber was in full flight away from the Bible. By the time the men there got horses saddled, he'd be long gone and far away.

But Pryor's head was splitting, his stomach was convulsed with nausea, and blood streamed into his eyes and filled his mouth. Blinking and spitting, he tried to fight down the sickness, but it went on growing, sapping his strength and blunting his will. Saber raced onward, practically without guidance, but Pryor knew he could not stick in the saddle much longer.

Miles away from the Bible, he stopped beside a creek and clambered heavily down to duck and bathe his head and face in the flowing water. It helped some, but not much. He had to find a place to hole up for the night. It was all he could do to climb back onto the horse.

Saber plodded on, easing the pace to permit Pryor's staying in the saddle. Some time later a crumbling line shack loomed ahead in a moonbright glade. Gun in hand, the Rio Kid hallooed the shanty, the exertion setting off rockets of pain in his skull and bringing the sweat out in great drops on his tortured face. There was no reply, no horses in view, and he rode forward.

Dismounting by the entrance, he slumped weakly to his knees, and had to grasp the stirrup to heave himself erect once more. Shouldering the door open, he stumbled inside and struck a match. The shack was empty, filthy and cobwebbed, but there was a crude bunk in one corner.

The match burned down to his fingers, but he scarcely felt the fire. Leading Saber inside he dropped the reins, closed the sagging door, and pitched headlong onto the bunk in the musky blackness.

Bob Pryor was too far gone to unsaddle his horse, or get his bedroll off from behind the cantle. He had reached and passed the limit of endurance. His skull felt fractured, his eyes were out of focus, and sickness still seethed in the pit of his stomach. If anyone came Saber would warn him. If anyone tried to get in, Saber would fight them off until he died fighting.

With his last conscious effort, the Rio Kid drew his right-hand gun and laid it within easy reach on the dirt floor. Then he relaxed, with a long sighing moan, and knew no more.

CHAPTER VI

Back From Torch and Gun

BOB PRYOR came back to life in a fiery furnace, drenched with sweat, his tongue swollen in a parched mouth behind lacerated lips, agony throbbing through his head. It was either early morning or dusk, he couldn't tell which. He got up groaning and reeled to an open window. Sunset colors washed the western skyline, and he knew then that he had slept throughout the day—if his nightmare loss of consciousness could be called sleep.

Saber was waiting patiently within the doorway. Pryor watered the horse from his bloody hat, and drank deeply himself from the canteen. Even that warm brackish water tasted wonderful, easing the crusted dryness of mouth and throat.

He drank again and paced about the one-room shanty, limbering his muscles, feeling the life beginning to stir once more in his veins. His eyes were in focus, the pain in his head lessening, and he was ready to ride again. Lucky they hadn't trailed him last night.

Well, it was time he got back to Medora—the town, not the woman, he thought, wryly whimsical. The de Mores and Overbaugh families might be in danger, in need of help.

Leading Saber outside, he got his bearings, stepped into the leather, and started in a southeasterly direction toward the Little Missouri River. At the first stream he came to, he paused to let the horse drink, refill his canteen, and wash up in the cool running water, gulping thirstily the while.

It was dark, the moon just rimming the eastern horizon, when Bob Pryor reached the Little Missouri and forded the shallows near the railroad bridge that connected de Mores's packing plant with the main line. The vast rambling establishment was in darkness, and Pryor wondered why the caretaker's lights were not glowing. The stench of the slaughterhouse fouled the night air as he rode forward, reining up short when Saber shied.

Pryor heard something rattling the brush on his right. Swinging down he moved toward the sounds and came upon the bound and gagged form of a man lying in the bushes, his eyes bulging above the gag and blood drying on his forehead.

The Rio Kid removed the gag and cut the man free from the ropes, asking him what had happened.

"Two men wearing masks," gasped the watchman. "Killed old Sam, knocked me out, and dumped me back here." The moon had risen enough to illuminate the earth now, as they peered at one another. "You're that new friend of de Mores, ain't you? Well, maybe you can stop 'em. I think they're going to set fire to the whole shebang."

"You want to come with me?" asked Pryor.

The watchman shook his gashed bald head. "I ain't no gunman. I don't draw fighting wages. I'm an old man and I got my lumps for tonight."

"I don't blame you a bit," Pryor said. "Just tell me where to go."

"Right through there between them buildings. That's where they was, son. Twenty years back I would've been right up there with you."

Bob Pryor clapped the old man on the shoulder and led Saber forward, dropping the reins in the shadow of the two buildings, striding on with hands easing the Colts in their sheaths. The sharp scent of kerosene came through the abattoir reek, and he knew that he had firebugs from the Bible Ranch to deal with tonight.

A keen exultation swelled inside him. It was time he got some of those vultures in his gun-sights. He hoped it would be Hash Creswell and Piper Rabb, but any two of them would do.

The coal-oil odor sharpened as he advanced, treading lightly in the darkness, gravel crunching beneath his boots. The two men had finished pouring kerosene over sun-dried wood, and were preparing to light torches when Pryor came within sight of them. His eyes fully adjusted to the night, he recognized the vandals in spite of their masked faces, or thought he did. The portly one was Piper Rabb, the slim one looked like Kid Madrid. In the flare of matches, he was almost positive he had identified them correctly.

HE CALLED out sharply before they could set the torches afire, and drew both Colts with smooth flawless speed, his thumbs cocking the hammers. The matches dropped, brief streaks of light in the gloom, one going out and the other still burning on the ground. The torches thudded down beside them, as the two men went for their guns, masked eyes dulled by the matchlight and searching the shadows. Pryor had them pinpointed even before their roaring muzzle-flames etched them in vivid relief.

Feeling the hot suction of passing slugs, he thumbed forward the hammer on his right-hand gun as it lined upon the slender man. The Colt jumped with the lancing flame, and the man he

thought was Kid Madrid broke backward and doubled in the middle, involuntary shots geysering dirt in front of him as he keeled slowly forward on his face in the smoking dust. Plump Piper Rabb was leveling off from his recoil when Pryor's left-hand gun lashed fire at him, jolting Rabb backward against the oil-soaked wooden wall.

Bouncing from the wood, Piper Rabb fell to his knees, his guns exploding on a down-slant, the bullets spattering dirt across Pryor's booted legs. The Rio Kid triggered once more with his right forefinger, as that barrel sank back into line. Rabb's large head jerked with the face-smashing impact that hurled him over backward against the base of the building. Powder smoke swirled pungently in the moonlight.

The burning match flame, spreading

Unless we can eliminate prejudice from the home, it will never be stopped in the streets.
—Basil O'Connor

in bleached dry grass, ignited one of the torches, illuminating the area with garish red light, and Bob Pryor sprang ahead to stamp out the blaze before it could reach the kerosene-doused wall of the meat-packing plant. He was still trampling out patches of fire when the caretaker he had freed came hobbling up with a lighted lantern.

"Never expected to see you alive again," the man grumbled. "Who are they, anyway?"

"Bible, I reckon," said Pryor, bending to lift the mask from the slim man's face. "Yes, here's Kid Madrid." He turned to the bulkier corpse at the foot of the wall, flipping up the mask to reveal the grotesquely ruined features of Piper Rabb. "And the Piper, just as I thought."

"A good night's work, mister," said the watchman. "It'll be a happy day for this country when the whole Bible bunch is put under the ground."

"You'd better report this in Medora and have the bodies taken care of," the Rio Kid said, replacing the spent shells in his cylinders. "And don't bring me into it. You just came to, got yourself loose, and found these men dead along with your partner, Sam."

"Anything you say, son," the old man said. "My name's Griffin. I'd like to shake your hand, Mr.—"

"Price," said the Rio Kid, shaking hands with him. "I'd better get out to the chateau now. They might be trying something there, too."

"Price?" muttered the watchman. "You ain't just another feller named Price, not a man that can use them six-guns like you can. But that's your business—Mr. Price. We're lucky to have you on our side, and you're siding a real man when you side the Marquis de Mores."

"I'll see you later, Griff," said Robert Pryor. "Don't think you'll have any more trouble here tonight, but you'd better put on an armed guard hereafter."

"Ain't no law in Medora," mumbled Griffin. "And that in Little Missouri don't amount to nothing. But I'll go over and bring Marshal Radford out here. The evidence'll speak for itself."

"Bring Packard, the newspaperman, too," suggested Pryor. "With him on hand, Radford won't be able to cover the Bible up much."

He turned back between the buildings, mounted Saber, and loped away toward the Chateau de Mores. It was a relief to get the fumes of coal-oil, gunpowder, and the slaughter pens out of his nostrils at last.

He sensed something wrong when he saw the chateau ablaze with lights and teeming with activity. He put Saber into a gallop, and swung down in front

of the bright-lighted manor. Two tarp-rolled bodies lay beside the porch, the remains of Idaho and Sawtooth, the de Mores riders who had brought in the news of the stolen herd and stayed behind to guard the chateau. A quick survey showed that they had been bludgeoned to death, skulls crushed in.

WITHIN the house, frantic distraught servants were striving to soothe and comfort Medora de Mores, who was on the hysterical verge of a complete nervous breakdown. Her baby daughter, Yvonne, had been carried away by the marauders. And the butler said that word had come from the Double O sheep ranch of the disappearance of Overbaugh's young son, Dirk. First the stock, and now the children!

The gardener reported that the kidnapers had ridden off into the dense woods behind the chateau, in the direction of the hills and mountains. He had seen one big brute and a small thin man. One of de Mores's riders, known as Laredo, had come over from the ranch and taken up the pursuit.

The Rio Kid decided to wait until morning before picking up the trail himself. He didn't think the kidnapers would harm the children, not immediately anyway, and perhaps he could do a better job of consoling the Marquise than the servants were doing.

Medora did seem to find his presence reassuring, and she gradually grew calmer and quieter as he talked to her with gentle cheer and confidence.

"I'll bring little Yvonne back safe and sound," he promised. "If Laredo hasn't already got her. I'll get Yvonne and young Dirk Overbaugh both, don't you worry. Now you let the nurse give you a sedative and go to sleep, Marquise."

"Please call me Medora—Bob," she said, with a wan smile. "I'm so glad you came back tonight. It's the next best thing to having Antoine home, at a time like this. Now that you're here, I will take a sedative and try to get some sleep."

CHAPTER VII

Fence Cutters' Fate

CATTLE AND SHEEP back in home territory, de Mores, Overbaugh and Mireles rode on ahead with three slightly wounded cowboys, leaving Duval and the rest to complete the long trail drive from Montana. Two de Mores men had died in the battle with the rustlers, and six had suffered wounds, two of them serious. Granville Stuart's party had lost three dead and four wounded, but the outlaw band had been entirely wiped out.

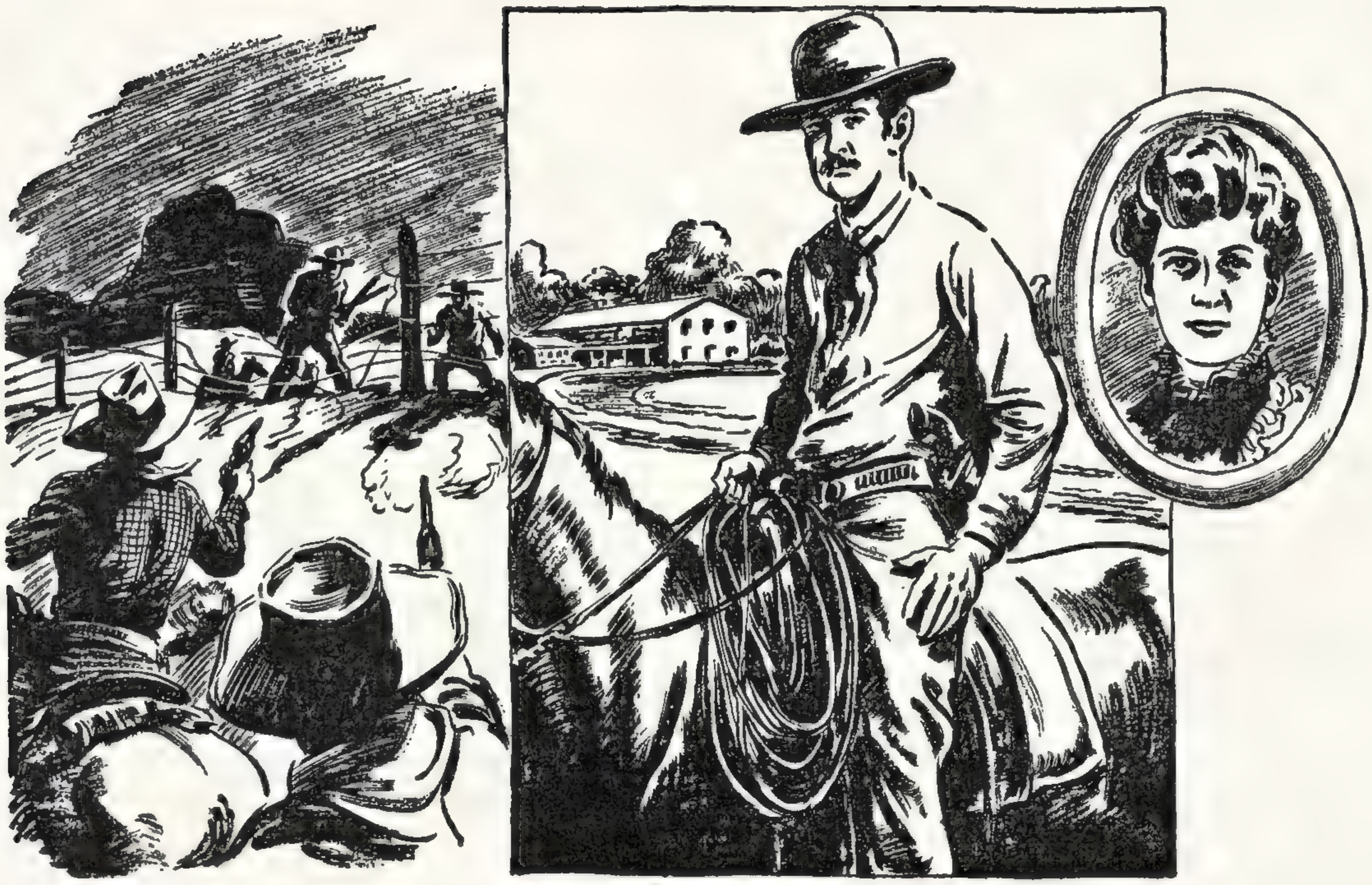
Only a score or so head were missing from either herd. The expedition had been successful, but the real enemy remained to be settled with yet. Luke Breason and his Bible gunhands.

Crossing a tract where his prize herd of thoroughbred horses had been pastured, de Mores searched in vain for the animals until he saw where the fence had been cut down. The horses had strayed or been driven off through that breach in the wire. De Mores's brilliant dark eyes flared with fury as he stared at the ruined fence and the horse tracks. Some more of Breason's work. It was time to bring this thing to a head, to smoke the Bible out into the open.

At his own ranch, de Mores sent some riders out to restring the wire and track the missing horse herd. The men at the ranch acted strangely, he thought, somehow depressed and furtive, almost guilty.

"What is the matter here?" de Mores asked. "What has happened while we've been gone?"

"Well, that Price caught Kid Madrid and Piper Rabb trying to set fire to the packing plant. They had killed old Sam and hit Griffin over the head, but Price



THE MARQUIS DE MORES

IN 1882 a French nobleman, Count Fitz-James, accompanied a hunting party to Dakota, where big-time ranching was developing and the last buffalo herds had retreated to die. On returning to France, Fitz-James recounted such laudatory tales to his cousin, Antoine de Vallombrosa, the Marquis de Mores, that de Mores made up his mind to visit the Badlands himself.

In Cannes on the French Riviera, the tall handsome de Mores had wooed and wed Medora von Hoffman, daughter of a millionaire New York banker, whose dowry was said to be $3,000,000. They arrived in a private railroad car at the town of Little Missouri, and de Mores immediately decided to invest his fortune in Dakota grasslands. By shrewd placement of water-right claims along the Little Missouri River, the Marquis bought 45,000 acres, which controlled several hundred thousand acres of buffalo-grass graze, at a cost of only $32,000. He began buying trail herds as fast as they came into the territory, and soon had the largest ranch in the region.

An expert with horses and guns, the reckless, flamboyant Frenchman took quickly to the ways of the frontier, but he was unpopular among the other citizens. Apparently they resented him as a foreigner, who had acquired wealth by marrying an American heiress. Public opinion turned so strongly against de Mores, when he planned to build a meat-packing plant adjacent to his ranch, that he left Little Missouri and built a town of his own on the east side of the river, named Medora after his wife.

In trying to compete with Gustavus Franklin Swift, the Chicago meat-packer, de Mores spread himself too wide and thin in a vast project foredoomed to failure, and before long had dissipated his fortune.

After failing in the Badlands, de Mores returned to France, became enmeshed in the Dreyfus affair, went big-game hunting in India, started a railroad in China, and was finally killed in a battle against the Arabs in Africa.

The grand twenty-eight room chateau he built for his wife still stands in the Badlands of Dakota, and overlooking the main street of Medora with arrogant pride and defiance is a statue of de Mores in the garb of a cowboy.

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killed both of 'em."

"That's good news, Naton, but you don't seem very pleased. What else is there? Give us the bad news now."

Naton wagged his head in abject misery, and swallowed painfully several

times. "I sure hate to have to tell you this, Marquis, but that same night—Well, somebody jumped and killed Sawtooth and Idaho at the chateau, and carried off little Yvonne. And—and they took Overbaugh's kid, Dirk, too."

The shocked faces of de Mores and Overbaugh were terrible to see, and Celestino Mireles turned away from the stricken men, grief and anger mingled inside himself.

"Laredo went after 'em that night," Naton continued, speaking with an effort. "Price went out the next morning. That was five—no, six—days ago."

"And you haven't heard anything from them?" de Mores demanded, his tone hollow and desolate.

"Not yet, Marquis," said Naton. "But they'll git them kids back. You know Laredo's good at tracking, and that Price must be hellfire with sixguns."

"I—I'd better be gettin' on home," Overbaugh mumbled brokenly. Turning blindly, he fumbled for the reins, mounted and lined off southward on the run.

"Come on, Celestino," said de Mores. Stepping into saddle he headed for the chateau, with Mireles quickly drawing abreast of him.

"The General weel save the children, Mark," said Mireles. "Weeth heem on the trail, you don't have to be afraid. The leetle Yvonne weel be all right."

"I think so myself," de Mores said. "But imagine how Medora must be suffering, what a hell she has been through! This is too much, Celestino. I'm going to kill Breason on sight! And anyone else I see from the Bible."

Some time after they had reached the chateau, Overbaugh returned there from the Double O, his broad face strained and sunken with despair. They were getting ready to have dinner when the cowhand, Naton, rode in leading two fresh saddled horses.

"Three men skulkin' around that horse pasture where the boys put up the new fence," Naton said. "Maybe they're going to cut it again, or maybe they ain't up to anything wrong. Figured you'd want to know."

De Mores nodded gravely, buckling on his gunbelt and picking up his carbine, as did Mireles. "We'll have a look at them, gentlemen. If they're from the Bible, they'll die." The Marquis called to his wife in the other room, "Have to go to the ranch, Medora. Sorry, but it can't be helped. We'll be back in about an hour."

THE Marquise came to the door.

"Do you have to go, Antoine?" she asked. Her handsome features showed the grief and strain of the past several days. "What is it now? More trouble?"

"It's nothing much, my darling," de Mores said. "Have them hold dinner. We'll be back as soon as possible."

They went out with Naton, mounting the horses he had brought them, while Overbaugh swung onto his mottled gray mustang. Naton rode with them toward the horse pasture, with de Mores setting a hard, racking pace.

"Think it's the Bible crew?" shouted Overbaugh, above the clatter of hoofs.

"Who else?" de Mores said, lips thinned under his neat black mustache.

"An old trail ran through there," Naton said. "The buffalo hunters used it a lot. Maybe it's some of them instead of the Bible."

"If it is, they're working for the Bible," declared de Mores. "They wouldn't dare to do it on their own."

Nearing their objective, they slowed to a walk in the waning light of late afternoon, skirting a forest of scrub oak, stunted spruce and dwarf cedar. Dismounting under the trees behind a low ridge, de Mores instructed Naton to stay there with the horses. When Naton protested, the Marquis said:

"There's only three of them. We don't want any advantage in numbers. You watch from the ridge line, Nate, and bring the horses down fast if these three try to run for it."

Rifles in hand, de Mores, Mireles, and Overbaugh climbed the easy grade through birch brush, stained scarlet

with buffalo berries, while Naton brought up the rear with the horses. The ridgetop overlooked the pasture, and down there by the newly repaired fence were three men, their mounts tethered in the background.

"It's them hunters," Naton said. "Riley Luffsey and Frank O'Donald and Dutch Wannigan."

"They're carrying wire cutters, along with their rifles and sixguns," de Mores said, and started down the slope with Mireles and Overbaugh walking on either side of him.

The men looked up and saw them coming, dropping their long-handled wire cutters and holding their rifles ready.

"That's far enough!" yelled the man Naton said was Riley Luffsey. "Pull back out, if you don't want to get hurt."

"This is my land and that's my fence!" de Mores called back. "You're the ones who are pulling out of here."

"We used this trail before you ever saw the United States, Frenchman!" shouted Frank O'Donald, spitting contemptuously from beneath his fierce bushy mustache. "No Frog's wire is going to keep us from using it some more. Back off before we start shooting, Fancypants!"

"How much is Luke Breason paying you for this?" bellowed Overbaugh.

"We don't work for Breason," said Dutch Wannigan, a clean-shaven man with boldly handsome features. "We hunt buffalo for ourselves, Frenchy. If you'd ever seen us shoot, you wouldn't be standing there arguing."

De Mores spoke low-voiced to his companions. "I've got Luffsey. Celestino, you take O'Donald. Odin, you can have Wannigan." He raised his voice. "Breason sent you to do this. Why not admit it?"

"So what if he did, Froggy?" jeered Luffsey. Jerking up his rifle he fired up the hillside, the bullet punching through the crown of de Mores's hat.

The Marquis shot quickly back at him, but missed. Mireles threw his Winchester to his shoulder and targeted on O'Donald, the butt jarring his slender frame as he squeezed the trigger. But he hit a fence post, showering O'Donald's mustached face with splinters, while O'Donald's first slug tore up the turf at the Mexican's feet. Overbaugh and Wannigan exchanged shots, each narrowly missing the other.

Then the firing became fast and furious in three separate duels at long range, the men aiming, triggering and levering with smooth speed and skill, the dusky air humming with hot leaden death. It was a test of steel nerves and raw courage, as well as marksmanship, to stand up in the open and trade shots with high-powered rifles.

BULLETS breathed ever closer, passing through clothing and searing the skin, as the riflemen hammered steadily away at one another. Overbaugh scored the first solid hit, smashing Wannigan over backward behind the fence, still alive but out of the fight.

The tough, cocky Riley Luffsey, shrinking under the intense pressure, sought the inadequate shelter of a fence post. It was there that de Mores's shots caught him, eating through the dry wood into his abdomen, and Luffsey writhed to earth with his arms wrapped about the foot of the post.

Celestino Mireles finally drove a slug home into his opponent, and Frank O'Donald collapsed on the wire he had come to cut, clawing at the strands and hanging on the fence, his carbine lying at his feet.

The Winchester duel was over. Reloading their weapons, the three men on the slope descended to the fence, with Naton bringing the horses down in back of them.

Riley Luffsey was dead. Dutch Wannigan and Frank O'Donald were badly wounded. Mireles led up their mounts and helped tie the dead man and his unconscious partners across their saddles.

The victors rode back in silence, feeling empty and let-down after the ten-

sion of battle, shocked and weak and faintly ill with the reaction. At the ranch, they loaded the three bodies into a wagon, and de Mores delegated Naton to drive it in to Dr. Slessinger's in Medora.

De Mores and his two comrades headed back for the chateau and a belated dinner, for which they no longer had an appetite.

The meal finished, the three men were smoking after-dinner cigars on the porch, still glum and untalkative, when Marshal Radford rode in at the head of a posse from Little Missouri, to arrest de Mores and Overbaugh for the murder of Riley Luffsey and the wounding of O'Donald and Wannigan.

"Murder," de Mores said, with fine disgust. "It was a pure case of self-defense. They had come to cut my fence again, and they started shooting at me on my own land. Don't be ridiculous, Marshal. A man has to protect his own property, if the law refuses to do so."

"You're coming to jail, de Mores, you and Overbaugh both," said Radford with finality, a black scowl on his beaked face.

De Mores regarded him with unutterable loathing. "Our children are kidnaped, our stock stolen, our men murdered, and *we* are going to jail! For fighting in defense of our lives and families and property. You make a sad travesty of the law and justice, Radford!"

"Cover them, men!" ordered Radford, and a score of guns were trained upon the gallery of the chateau. "You'd better come peaceful, Frenchman, if you don't want to die on your own doorstep. You're under arrest and all that fancy talk ain't going to get you out of it. And that friend of yours who calls himself Price is going in the calaboose when I get hold of him, too."

"Why?" demanded de Mores. "Because he kept a couple of bandits from burning down my packing plant?"

"You admit he killed Rabb and Madrid then?"

"I don't know anything about it. I was up in Montana doing your work for you, Radford."

"Shut up!" rasped the marshal. "You coming without no fuss now?"

De Mores shrugged. "There isn't much choice, is there?"

"You're damn right there ain't, Frenchy!"

Overbaugh heaved ponderously to his feet. "You can arrest us, but you'll never make it stick, lawman."

Radford laughed. "If I get a sheepman in jail, the only way he'll get out is with a rope on his neck!"

The Marquis rose with easy grace. "Can I say good-by to my family? Or what the Bible has left of it."

Radford nodded curtly. "Make it quick and don't try nothing funny." He squinted at Mireles and scratched his jutting bony chin. "Probably ought to take that Mex in, too, but I ain't got no warrant for him. Well, de Mores and Overbaugh are the ones we want most."

"That jail will never hold us, Radford," said Overbaugh.

"I'm kind of afraid myself—" Radford grinned— "that a mob'll bust in and lynch you fellers, in spite of all I can do to protect you."

"That ees no doubt part of the plan," Celestino Mireles murmured.

"Button your lip, Mexican!" snarled Radford. "Or I'll have you drug in to jail at the end of a rope!"

DE MORES came back from bidding farewell to his wife and infant son. Two deputies stepped down and relieved the Marquis and Overbaugh of their gunbelts. The deputies glanced hungrily at Mireles, but Marshal Radford said:

"Never mind the Mex. We can pick him up anytime we want him. Along with that Price lobo. Come on, let's go."

"I'll tell Packard," said Mireles. "And the General—as soon as I see him."

Radford glared at him. "If you got any sense you'll hightail it the hell out of this country, Mex! And take Packard and Price with you."

The posse rode away with the prisoners. Celestino Mireles watched them out of sight. Then he went into the house to take his turn at trying to console Medora de Mores.

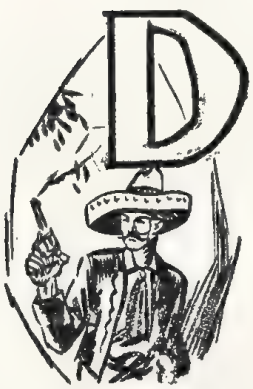
That evening Packard visited the chateau to keep Medora company and get Mireles's version of the shooting of the fence cutters, as well as to see if there was any word from Laredo or the Rio Kid and the children. Packard was plainly worried about the predicament of de Mores and Overbaugh, although he tried to conceal it from the Marquise.

"I'm going to send for a United States marshal," declared Packard. "Radford takes orders directly from Luke Breason. There's no limit to what they might attempt, now that Mark and Overbaugh are in their hands. The only safe way is to bring in the Federal law, and let the Government clean up the Bible and Little Missouri. It should have been done a long time ago, as a matter of fact.— Fortunate they overlooked arresting you too, Celestino. Your testimony can go a long way toward clearing Mark and Overbaugh. But your life will be in danger from now on."

"Eet always ees. Senor Pack," said Mireles, smiling. "Weethout the danger eet would be a lonesome life for the General and me."

CHAPTER VIII

The Black Hills of Dakota



DEEP in the rugged broken wilderness of the Black Hills, after six days on the trail, Bob Pryor was finally closing in on the two kidnapers and their young captives. Three days before he had come upon the riddled body of Laredo, shot twice in the back where one of the Bible men had doubled back and ambushed him from behind.

They were Bible men—Hash Creswell and Ace Adair. Although unable to run them down as yet, the Rio Kid had identified them through his field-glasses from a distance. They had the children tied in a double basketlike contraption, slung on the back of a led horse. The little girl, and the boy who was about eight or nine years of age, seemed to be well and unhurt, taking it bravely.

Time after time Pryor had thought he was within striking range, only to have his quarry vanish as if the earth had swallowed them up. Adair and Creswell know every pass and ridge and canyon in these hills, and were skilled at hiding their tracks in creeks and deer runs, on rocky escarpments and ledges. They were forever twisting, turning and doubling, and the Rio Kid had to be always alert against an attack from the rear.

But he was a master at this game himself, as patient, tireless and elusive as an Indian. It was doubtful if the Bible men knew they were being followed, since they had killed Laredo. But they took no chances, anyway. Their trace was obscure, erratic, and often disappeared completely in stretches.

Much of the traveling had been in zigzags and circles. After all this time they were no great distance from Little Missouri and Medora, Pryor estimated.

On this afternoon, Adair and Creswell, with their child prisoners, had taken refuge in an old cabin in a sheltered basin wooded with towering lodgepole pines and Englemann's spruce. From the rimrock above the bowl, Bob Pryor watched them unsaddle and stake out the horses, and turn the kids free in the grass beside the hut. He didn't want to shoot it out with them in front of little Yvonne de Mores and Dirk Overbaugh. He'd have to wait until the children were asleep tonight, impatient as he was to get it over with and start for home.

Medora de Mores must be out of her mind by this time, he thought bitterly. But the Marquis, Mireles, Overbaugh

and the others should be back from Montana by now, and that would be some solace to Medora and Mrs. Overbaugh, at least.

While Saber grazed below the rim, the Rio Kid settled down to wait with all the patience he could muster, baring his cropped chestnut head in the shade of rippling poplars, which gave off a resinous scent. The coppery beard stubble on his lean, handsome face, itched, and he felt filthy and uncomfortable in the sweated dirty clothes he'd been living in day and night. He had been on short rations to conserve his grub, and his stomach felt shrunken and tight. His blue eyes ached from the sun's glare, and his limbs and body were saddle-cramped, galled and lame.

Well, the long chase had come to a close at last. He wondered how to handle the showdown. He had no compunction about shooting those two renegades, if the children didn't have to witness it, but he couldn't kill them from ambush. He'd have to give them a fighting chance, and that meant going against two-to-one odds, unless he was lucky enough to catch them one at a time.

If they stood watch in turn, that would simplify matters. But they might not keep any watch. They were both experts with guns, particularly little Ace Adair. It would be tough if Pryor had to face them together.

Perhaps he could catch them both asleep and club them unconscious, without having to kill them. As much as those two deserved killing, the Rio Kid had never considered himself an executioner, and never became one unless the rôle was forced upon him without alternative.

The afternoon wore to an end, and the sun sank in fiercy splendor behind the western mountain ranges. After an interval of blackness, the rising moon limned the eastern peaks in pure golden fire, and then soared above them to spread its radiance. Timber wolves howled mournfully from afar, and an eagle screamed over some distant cliff. The night air was fragrant with the smell of pines, spruces and poplars.

IN THE log cabin below, Adair and Creswell prepared an evening meal, put the children to bed, and came outside to lounge at ease and smoke handmade cigarettes. Pryor had dropped below the crest to grain and water Saber, to eat sparingly himself, and enjoy a smoke.

Now he was impatient to strike, to get into action and wind up this affair. The quicker he got the kids home, the better it would be for the de Moreses and Overbaughs. But it seemed as if the two Bible men were going to roost outside there all night.

The Rio Kid was about ready to move in on them when Hash Creswell heaved his great bulk upright and turned into the hut. After ten minutes passed without his reappearing, Pryor concluded that Creswell had gone to sleep, leaving Adair to stand the first sentry duty.

The Rio Kid waited a bit longer, then dropped from the rimrock and threaded his way through the brush and trees toward the cabin. The log structure, backed against a cliff, faced an open clearing, and there was no way of getting in close enough to surprise and jump Ace Adair. It required gunplay and that would arouse Creswell but maybe, Pryor thought, he could down Adair in time to be ready for the big man.

Moonbeams filtered through the trees, and flooded the open glade with silvery light. Adair sat with his shoulders against a boulder, about ten feet in front of the doorway, an evil, vicious little figure, even in repose.

The Rio Kid recalled how this pair had beaten Sawtooth and Idaho to death at the chateau, and had shot Laredo in the back on the trail, but he couldn't bring himself to the point of gunning Adair from cover. In Bob Pryor's code, the other man always got a fair even shake.

Moving as smoothly and silently as a

shadow, he reached the fringe of spruces at the edge of the clearing, some sixty feet from Adair and the shanty. Erect in the black shadows, the Rio Kid loosened his guns in the leather.

"All right, Adair, you're covered!" he called. "Put 'em up high, Ace."

Ace Adair came up and threw his guns clear in one swift sinuous motion, as quick and deadly as a striking snake. Fire spurted from his hands with a shattering roar as Bob Pryor stepped forward into the open and lined his right-hand Colt. The Rio Kid felt the blistering nearness of passing bullets, and his own gun blazed brightly and bucked up hard in his big hand. Dust puffed out from the chest of Adair's brush jacket, the slug shocking him backward until his thin hips struck that boulder.

A snarl on his narrow wizened rat-face, Ace Adair fought to raise his guns again, but he was hard hit and the irons had grown suddenly heavy. They flared once more, the shots chewing up dirt and ferns near Pryor's boots, as he strode steadily forward. When his barrel dropped level from the recoil, Bob Pryor fired again, blasting Adair against the rock.

With a choking sigh, Ace Adair lurched forward, tripped and rolled over onto his back. He lay there in the moonlight, legs spraddled, arms flung wide, woodchuck teeth bared to the starry sky.

The Rio Kid was racing for the cabin wall when Hash Creswell loomed monstrously in the open doorway, hands empty, heavy features stupid with sleep and surprise.

"What the hell?" he roared, and started to withdraw and grope for his gunbelt.

But Pryor was on top of him, hammering his gun-barrel across that huge head. Creswell grunted and bowed under the steel, and Pryor's left arm locked about the man's bull-neck in a stranglehold, jerking him forward, dragging him outside into the yard.

The terrified cries of children rose from the interior as the two men grappled and strained in ragged, reeling circles. Half stunned as he was, Creswell still had the strength of a moose, and while Pryor did retain his hold, he was unable to throw the giant.

FORCING Creswell's head down low, the Rio Kid brought his knee up into the fellow's face with crushing force. The big man groaned and weakened a bit. Lifting powerfully with his headlock, Pryor hurled Hash over backward on the ground. Creswell tried to get his boots up, but Pryor dodged around them, sinking both knees in that broad abdomen and grinding the giant into the earth.

He clipped the man again with his gun-barrel, and clubbed his left fist into the bleeding face. But Creswell was still struggling and threshing about beneath him with incredible vitality and stamina.

Once more the Rio Kid chopped down on that iron skull with his Colt, and this time the shaggy, oversized head fell back and lolled loosely in the grass and weeds. Hash Creswell had lost consciousness at last, and he should be out for a good long while. But Pryor got up, panting and sweating in the cool night, and went to the Bible saddle gear for some rope. There was no telling about a bull like Creswell.

The Rio Kid lashed the man's wrists behind him, and linked them tight to the closely-bound ankles. If Creswell came to now, he wouldn't be moving around any for some time. Eventually he could probably free himself, but by then it would not matter. Pryor knew he ought to finish Creswell off, but he couldn't do it.

Lighting a match the Rio Kid stepped inside the cabin, murmuring:

"It's all right, kids. Don't be afraid. I've come to take you home." He found and lighted the lamp on the rude table, and gathered up Creswell's guns. The children remembered him and stopped wailing in their blankets. He lifted them

tenderly upright. "Do you want to start home tonight? The moon is bright enough to travel."

"Yes, oh yes!" cried little Yvonne. "Let's go right away. Are the bad men gone?"

"Well, I put them to sleep for awhile."

"You shot one of 'em, didn't you?" Dirk Overbaugh asked calmly. "You must of shot the little one. There was a lot of shooting."

"Just enough to keep him quiet," Bob Pryor said. "You kids wait here while I get the horses ready."

"Don't put me in that rig no more," Dirk said. "I can ride a horse real good, mister."

"All right, Dirk. I'll shorten up some stirrups for you. And Yvonne can ride in the basket."

"I can ride a saddle too," the little girl said gravely. "But I might get sleepy and fall off tonight."

"Can I carry a gun, mister?" asked Dirk. "Pop showed me how to shoot."

"I reckon so," Pryor agreed. "We've got plenty of extra guns now."

"You're a brave man, aren't you?" Yvonne asked.

"Why, not especially, honey," said the Rio Kid, with a smile.

"Yes, you are!" she insisted. "You're brave like my daddy. You'd be nice-looking too, if you didn't have those whiskers on your face."

"Thank you, ma'am," Bob Pryor said, with a wink at the Overbaugh boy. "I'll shave for you, as soon as I get time."

He went out, smiling, to pick up Adair's weapons and prepare the horses for the homeward journey. Adair was dead, and Creswell was still unconscious. The moon scaled the heavens in silvery glory, and coyotes barked and bayed at it from somewhere in the Black Hills.

WHEN Yvonne was safely back in her mother's arms at the chateau, and Naton was taking Dirk home to the Double O, the Rio Kid shaved, bathed, dressed in a fresh outfit, and settled down with Celestino Mireles to discuss the situation in Little Missouri. The Marquis and Overbaugh were still in jail there, in constant danger of being dragged out and lynched by a liquored-up mob of Bible sympathizers, incited by Luke Breason and his agents.

"We better get in there queeck, General," said Mireles. "Thees Marshal Radford geeves no protection to our friends. He ees all for Breason and the Bible. He would like veree much to see de Mores and Overbaugh hanging by the neck. And thees Breason ees buying wheesky for everybody in town. When they get drunk enough, they weel rush the jail-house."

"How many of de Mores's men will ride with us, amigo?" inquired Pryor.

"Maybe Naton and a few more. Most of them have no heart to face that mob. Ees too much for them, the whole country up against de Mores."

"We'll go alone then," Bob Pryor said. "Two men with sawed-off shotguns can stand off a mob, if their nerve holds. Wyatt Earp used to do it. Let's have a look at de Mores's gun racks."

"Ees possible," Mireles admitted dubiously. "Ees also uncomfortable, General. I theenk Packard and Roosevelt weel stand up weeth us maybe. Four shotguns ees better than two, no?"

In the armory of the chateau, they found a rack of double-barreled Greeners with sawed-off barrels, and loaded four of them carefully with heavy charges of buckshot. With their six-guns belted on, their Winchesters in the saddle-boots, they mounted Saber and the black and headed for town, carrying two shotguns each.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE KILLER SHERIFF

An Exciting Action Story

By GEORGE KILRAINE

CHAPTER IX

Little Missouri Mob

PACKARD and Roosevelt emerged from the newspaper office in Medora, and swung aboard their waiting horses to join the Rio Kid and Mireles, accepting a shotgun apiece with sober smiles. Packard wore a gunbelt today, and Roosevelt's stocky form was hung with two Colts.

"Shotguns are the thing for this kind of work," Roosevelt said approvingly, teeth and glasses gleaming in his square-jawed mustached face.

Packard said wryly, "I'd probably do better with a baseball bat myself."

"With any kind of luck we won't have to fire a shot," Bob Pryor told them quietly. "Mobs are made up of cowards, and the biggest cowards are often drunk enough to crowd into the front row. When they look into shotgun muzzles, they wish they were back in their favorite saloon."

"And I don't blame them." Packard laughed, eying his Greener. "These things look wicked enough to send anyone back to the barroom with an almighty thirst."

Mireles nodded, grinning. "No matter how they keeck, ees better to be behind than in front of them, señores."

"We telegraphed for a Federal marshal, Pryor," said Packard. "But he'll probably get here after it's all over."

"Maybe we won't need him, Pack—until it's over," the Rio Kid said.

It was mid-afternoon when they crossed the river into Little Missouri, and saw the square in front of the jailhouse jammed with an ugly, surging mass of people, most of them inebriated and shouting vile taunts and insults at the prisoners inside the adobe walls. Crossing the main street and swinging around behind the line of stores and saloons, the Rio Kid led his small party to the rear of the jailhouse, where a deputy named Hascall stood guard at the back door.

"Where's Radford?" asked Pryor.

Hascall shrugged. "Over to the Western House, I guess."

"Why isn't he here? Doesn't he realize that mob's liable to rush the jail any time now?"

"What could he do, if they did? What can anybody do against an army?"

"That's a mob, not an army," the Rio Kid said. "Let us in through the jail, and we'll hold them off at the front."

"Not a chance, mister," said Hascall. "It's a trick to get de Mores and Overbaugh out. Move along and don't try to meddle with the law."

"You'd like to see de Mores and Overbaugh lynched, wouldn't you?"

Hascall laughed, cradling his carbine carelessly. "It don't make much difference to me, to tell the truth. I ain't seen a good hanging in quite a spell."

Bob Pryor drew right-handed and gunwhipped Hascall into a senseless heap in the dirt, before the deputy could stir a muscle in defense. Pryor and his comrades swung down, ground-tying their horses, and the Rio Kid took Hascall's ring of keys and opened the back door.

"Bring some rifles for Mark and Odin," he instructed, walking along the cell block toward the front of the building.

The other three followed him, carrying shotguns and rifles, barring the door behind them.

De Mores and Overbaugh, the only prisoners, occupied one cell with two wooden bunks. They smiled at the sight of friends, and Pryor searched for the key to unlock their cage.

"Yvonne and Dirk are back home, as good as ever," he said. "Not harmed a bit."

"Who had them, Bob?" asked de Mores.

"Adair and Creswell. They bush-

whacked Laredo, too."

"You killed them, Bob?"

"I got Adair, and left Creswell knocked out and tied up in the hills."

The Rio Kid unlocked the grilled door, and the two captives stepped out and grasped the rifles thrust at them.

"You stay back out of sight," Pryor said. "We're going out front with these shotguns. You can cover us from the office windows."

"We should be out there with you," de Mores protested.

"No, it might set the crowd off if they saw you," Pryor said. "We're here to protect you, Mark, not to break you out of jail. Unless the mob forces us all to run for it."

OVERBAUGH smiled somberly. "They won't charge into them shotgun muzzles. —How did Dirk stand it?"

"Fine," said Pryor. "He came home riding Adair's horse and wearing one of Ace's guns. Dirk's a great kid, and so's Yvonne."

They all moved into the front office, where de Mores and Overbaugh took positions by the windows overlooking the noisy swarming plaza. The faces of the mob and the animal sounds arising from them were horrible to see and hear. The Rio Kid knew how de Mores and Overbaugh must have felt, unarmed and helpless behind those bars, with that crowd of maniacs screaming for their blood.

Two deputies, with blanched faces and haunted eyes, cowered by the front steps of the jailhouse, rifles held half-heartedly on the foremost ranks of the mob. It was a wonder Radford hadn't sent them home, but the Rio Kid supposed the marshal wanted to make some pretense of protecting his prisoners.

Trailed by Mireles, Packard and Roosevelt, he filed out front and stood beside the deputies, shotguns trained on the men at the front of the massed assemblage.

"It's that hired killer, Price, and his Mexican pard!" a voice announced. "And Editor Packard and Four-Eyes Roosevelt. Come on, let's string 'em all up!"

The Rio Kid spoke clearly. "Have you men ever seen what four double-barreled Greeners can do to a mob at point-blank range? If you want to find out, start moving in on us. This buckshot will cut you down back to the fifth row."

The crowd milled uncertainly, the men in the rear pushing forward while those in front tried to edge backward. The twin muzzles of those four Greeners looked murderous in the extreme, and the forward ranks immediately lost interest in any lynching. The men at the back, however, secure behind a dense wall of humanity, shrieked insults and threats, and urged their fellows to charge the calaboose.

"There's only four of 'em. Trample 'em, stomp 'em, shove them shotguns right down their gullets! We want to see that Frenchy and the sheepman dangling from ropes!"

Theodore Roosevelt raised his husky voice. ""Make way for the men in the rear! They want to stand up against these shotguns. Give them a chance to show how brave they are."

It was sound psychology. The men in the foreground turned against those in the rear, and the mob was quickly divided. But the danger was still grave. Cries of blood lust continued, and any moment some drunk might pull a gun and touch off the bloody fireworks. One shot would do it; one exploding shell could precipitate a massacre.

The afternoon sun beat down, and dust billowed up from hundreds of scuffing boots, to hang like powdered gold in the sunshine. Tension grew until it was unbearable. The deputies had slunk away, and four men stood before that great gesticulating mob. Pryor felt cold sweat trickle from his armpits, and enormous drops spring out on his fine bronzed face.

His comrades were sweating freely, too, drawn past the breaking point but still standing firm, holding their shot-

A. T. PACKARD

AFTER his graduation from the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, where he had been a star baseball player, A. T. Packard came west and established a newspaper, the ***Badlands Cowboy***, in Medora, where he became a friend and confidante of both Theodore Roosevelt and the Marquis de Mores. Packard's frank and honest policy of reporting the news won him widespread loyalty and respect in western Dakota. A sound and brilliant thinker, Packard's friendship with Roosevelt undoubtedly contributed toward shaping Teddy's future rise in national politics.

After de Mores had built a hotel, theater and employees' clubhouse in Medora, he decided to establish a 200-mile stageline to Deadwood, more or less as a hobby, and asked Packard to manage it for him. When Packard protested that he knew nothing about stage-coaches or lines, de Mores declared that he would rather have an honest manager than an experienced one, and Packard accepted the job. Despite lack of experience, Packard got the line into smooth and effective operation, but the decline of Deadwood made it a short-lived enterprise. The four fancy coaches were eventually sold to Buffalo Bill Cody for use in his Wild West Show.

Packard's prominence in the Badlands was a tribute to his character, intelligence, diversified talents and adaptability.

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guns steady. Celestino Mireles was smiling slightly, slim and graceful behind those twin barrels. The big rangy Packard stood tall and straight, his eyes level and unwavering against that storm of hatred. Teddy Roosevelt, blinking mildly behind his spectacles, showed more teeth than ever under his ragged mustache, standing stocky and solid as a rough-hewn stone statue.

Even a veteran fighting man like the Rio Kid felt the temptation to break and retreat. It must have been cruelly hard for comparative novices like Roosevelt and Packard to face that inflamed hostile crowd. But they measured up to it like real troopers. And behind them were two good men, in de Mores and Overbaugh, their rifles ready within the adobe façade.

The square was strangely hushed now, the spirit of the mob faltering, fading and ebbing. The men in the front lines shifted uneasily, beginning to feel rather foolish and futile.

THE Rio Kid thought, a few more minutes and we'll have the advantage. They're beginning to crumble and come apart, without any real leadership. If we can hold it for a few minutes longer—

But the minutes were aching hours of agony, numbing the mind and draining the body. Any second some crackpot might pull a gun and fire, and the slaughter would be on in full scale.

"All right, break it up and move out!" the Rio Kid commanded crisply, swinging his scattergun slowly to and fro, the double hammers cocked and ominous in the crook of his thumb. "Get going before we open up on you. Go on, move out now!"

There were angry rumbles of disapproval in the background, but the front ranks began to break, scatter and drift away. Soon the whole crowd was in motion, the foremost lines hastening and relieved, the men in the rear grumbling and reluctant, but quickening their steps as aisles opened and exposed them directly to the four shotguns.

In a few minutes the plaza was emptied, except for a few aimless stragglers. Bob Pryor drew a long, weary breath, and his companions sighed aloud. The relief from tension was so great they felt faint and hollow.

"Let's get inside before somebody starts sniping," Pryor said, and they rejoined de Mores and Overbaugh in the marshal's office.

"A good thing Breason wasn't out there," Packard said. "They would have charged us if Luke had been there driving them on."

"We'd better camp right here tonight," suggested Roosevelt, polishing his sweat-fogged glasses. "They might try something else."

They settled down in the office, chasing Radford away at gun point when he strutted in to order them off the premises. They had suppers brought in from a nearby restaurant, and afterward sat in the unlighted room watching the square and the street, their guns close at hand, a bottle of whisky from the Pioneer on the desk.

The evening train brought a United States marshal named Innes, and his deputy, Cowan. They came directly to the jailhouse, and sat down to talk things over with the men they found forted up there. They knew of the Rio Kid and Mireles, the Marquis de Mores and Packard, as well as considerable about Breason, the Bible Ranch and the general setup in Little Missouri.

They were glad to meet Overbaugh, and they treated Theodore Roosevelt with great respect and deference. That substantiated what the Rio Kid had suspected—that Roosevelt was a man of some prestige and power in the East.

"The charges against de Mores and Overbaugh are absurd, of course," Innes said. "But we'll go through with a trial, as soon as possible, to satisfy public opinion. The testimony of Mireles and Naton will clear you two men without question. And then we'll investigate Luke Breason and his Bible spread, although it seems that most of the gunmen we were warned against have expired recently."

"Thanks to Captain Bob Pryor," said de Mores, with his charming smile. "Unless Creswell is back from the Black Hills, there are only two real bad ones left—Cape Mifflin and Breason himself."

"Where's this town marshal, Radford?" asked Innes.

"I don't know," Bob Pryor said. "We chased him out of here awhile ago. He probably ran to tell Breason on us."

Marshal Innes nodded solemnly. "I have an idea Radford will be leaving these parts for good, and shortly now."

When the chance came in private, the Rio Kid thought he would tell Innes about the two French assassins he had seen at the Bible. Meanwhile he'd be on

the lookout for them. He didn't want to heap any more worries upon the dark curly head of de Mores.

CHAPTER X

Envoys From France

THE trial was a mere formality. No one appeared to testify against de Mores and Overbaugh. The wounded Wannigan and O'Donald had confessed to the Federal marshals that Luke Breason had hired them to cut de Mores's fences. All charges were dropped, the case dismissed, and de Mores and Overbaugh were set free. The testimony of Mireles and Naton was not needed to clear the defendants.

The complexion of Little Missouri had changed with the coming of U. S. Marshals Innes and Cowan. The town marshal, Radford, and some of his crooked deputies had disappeared. Luke Breason and Cape Mifflin, bereft of their four top gunhands, were keeping out of sight. Public feeling was switching in favor of de Mores and Overbaugh, and Breason's tyrannical reign seemed to be coming to an end in the Badlands.

De Mores and Overbaugh were cheered when they left the courthouse with Pryor and Mireles, Packard and Roosevelt, and undoubtedly by some of the same people who had been ready to lynch them a couple of days earlier. Innes and Cowan shook hands all around before going to call on Breason, declining the offer of the other men to accompany them to the Bible spread.

"You boys have done more than your share here," Innes told them. "We'll take it the rest of the way, if we can, and earn our salaries. If we need a posse, we'll know whom to call on first."

With that the marshals left them to head for the Bible in the north, while the other six riders turned eastward across the Little Muddy toward home. In Medora, after several rounds of drinks in the elegant hotel bar, Odin Overbaugh branched off to the south, eager to get back to his family on the Double O, while Packard and Roosevelt stopped at the *Badlands Cowboy* building.

Flanked by Bob Pryor and Celestino Mireles, the Marquis de Mores went on in the direction of his meat-packing plant and the outlying chateau.

"I suppose little Yvonne has fallen in love with the dashing Captain Pryor," remarked de Mores to the Mexican. "And I'll have to charm and win her all over again."

"Ees a great charmer, the General," Mireles grinned, "but he never falls in love heemself, Mark. Unless maybe weeth one young as Yvonne."

In mid-morning there was no activity around the packing house. It appeared to be shut down, idle and deserted, and Pryor glanced questioningly at the Marquis. De Mores smiled and shrugged philosophically.

"Must be orders from my father-in-law in New York. He claims the packing business is losing a million dollars a year. Perhaps he is right. And you were right, Rio Kid, about my not putting Gus Swift out of the business. But at least I can raise cattle and horses now, without having my stock stolen by the Bible riders."

"The boys brought back most of your thoroughbred horses, Mark," said Mireles. "Meant to tell you before, but that mob drove eet out of my head."

"That's good, Celestino," said de Mores. "I'd rather run horses and cattle than pack meat anyway. And Overbaugh can raise his sheep in peace now. That is the best thing of all, for it means life to him and his family. We owe a great deal to you two gentlemen."

"Ees notheeng, Señor Mark," said Mireles.

"Many have died, though," murmured de Mores, with a sorrowful shake of his regal head. "That herder of Odin's. Baldy and Kansas with my cattle, and two more up in Montana. Old Sam at the plant here, and Idaho and Sawtooth at the chateau. And four men on the Bible side. Still it could have been much worse. And we got our children and our stock back. I wish I could do something to repay you two. I'd like to hire you and keep you here, but I know you wouldn't stay."

"No, we have to keep moving, Mark," said Bob Pryor. "There are always others who need help here and there."

"*Si*," agreed Mireles. "Ees beeg, the West."

"Well, if I can ever do anything for you," de Mores said, "I'll do it regardless. Until then you have my sincerest friendship and gratitude."

THE Rio Kid said, "We appreciate that, Mark. It is all we want. But this may not be over yet, with Breason and Mifflin still alive." He was thinking of Cretain and Lenaude, too, but he didn't mention them.

"That is true," said de Mores. "Those two are the most dangerous, the worst of all. And they will not give up without making another try. I hope they strike at me instead of Overbaugh."

"I have a hunch they will," the Rio Kid said.

In fact, that was why he and Celestino were riding home with de Mores instead of with Overbaugh. Luke Breason had once boasted that he would have Medora de Mores, if it was the last act of his life. The thought chilled Pryor through, in the morning brightness. He had grown fond of Medora, as well as of her husband.

Bullets burred and screeched suddenly on the sunlit air, and the Rio Kid heard the lead strike as de Mores lurched and toppled sideward from saddle, the golden palomino curveting away and coming back to stand over him. The reports crashed and echoed on the walls of the packing plant buildings, and smoke curled up against the clapboards.

The Rio Kid and Mireles put their mounts forward at a headlong gallop, raking out their right-hand guns and flattening themselves on their horses' necks. More slugs screamed about them, and two dark figures separated and fled among the structures of the plant.

Cretain and Lenaude, the killers from the French Republic! The squat, frog-like Cretain was fleeing left toward the refrigerator cars on the side track, while the thin, dapper Lenaude disappeared to the right among the buildings. Bob Pryor kneed Saber after Cretain, and Mireles drove his black in pursuit of Lenaude.

Taking a brief look over his shoulder, the Rio Kid saw de Mores sprawled motionless in the gravel where he had fallen, the golden horse muzzling his inert shoulder. It was ironic that de Mores should get it this way, at the hands of two countrymen from across the Atlantic, after all the dangers he had survived in America.

Whipping through passages and alleys on his black, Celestino Mireles spotted Lenaude trying to s q u i r m through the rails into a corral near the reeking slaughter-pen. The Frenchman twisted and fired as Mireles thundered toward him, the slug slicing the brim off the side of the Mexican's sombrero.

Mireles threw down and triggered from his racing mount. The s h o t smashed Lenaude against the bars, driving him the rest of the way through.

Lenaude fell inside the corral, rolling in the dust and hitching up and around on his knees, his pistol blaring once more. The shot ripped splinters off a wooden rail and whined past the onrushing black gelding.

Mireles fired again from the saddle, the flame spearing through the bars at the Frenchman. Lenaude rocked back from his knees onto his heels, writhed about and stretched full length in the corral dirt, with dust smoking up around him. Mireles shot him again for

good measure, and rode on to see if his General needed any assistance out back.

Bob Pryor took the corner of the last building in a tight, leaning turn on Saber, in time to see Cretain reach the row of refrigerator cars on the siding and scramble underneath one of them. As Pryor drove the dun toward the track after him, fire jetted from beneath that car, tearing up the sod about Saber's flying hoofs. The shooting ceased, and Pryor swept onward, slowing the big raw-boned horse alongside a boxcar.

Sheathing his gun, the Rio Kid reached out and grasped a rusty iron handrail on the ladder at the end of the car, kicking out of the stirrups and swinging himself clear of the saddle as he sent Saber away on the run. Cretain tried a couple of more shots at the dun's legs without success. The Rio Kid climbed the ladder with catlike ease and quickness, the flaked iron and sun-baked wood hot to the touch, and crossed the top of the car in a low crouch, Colt in hand.

Cretain, just emerging from under the cars, glanced up and fired swiftly, raising a fountain of splinters from the upper edge of the boxcar as Pryor dodged back and ran along the catwalk. Flattening out and snaking to the rim of the next car, Pryor peered over and lashed a shot down at the Frenchman.

CRETAIN fell on all fours, creeping and then lunging across the rails in under the train. The Rio Kid fired down the side and smashed Cretain's leg before the man could haul it out of sight.

Screaming and threshing in frenzied fury, Cretain rolled and heaved out into the open, lying on his back and shooting wildly up at the top of the car, his squash-face distorted with pain and rage. Pryor ducked back under a hail of wood fragments and waited for the Frenchman to empty his gun. When the racket stopped, the Rio Kid hooked his gun hand over the brink and called on Cretain to surrender. The man shook his head, groping in his clothes for another weapon, hit twice but game to the core.

The Rio Kid rose and leaped lightly down to the embankment beside the track, whirling and lining his Colt at once on the wounded man. Fire streaked up from Cretain's side, and Pryor felt the breath of that one. Aiming at the gun-arm he let go, and saw Cretain jerk and grovel in the cinders, the pistol slithering out of his hand, gold teeth agleam in a snarling grimace. As the Rio Kid jumped beside him, Cretain hunched convulsively over onto his flat dark face, lapsing at last into unconsciousness, with his head on the ties.

The Frenchman had a broken leg and arm and a body wound, but the Rio Kid figured he would live and talk to the authorities. He lifted the small, stumpy form over one shoulder, and started walking around the train of refrigerator cars.

Calling, "You all right, General *mio?*" Celestino Mireles rode around the bunker at the end of the track. "Here, General, leeft heem across my horse."

When they rounded the freight cars, Saber came running up, and the Rio Kid stepped into the leather. Clearing the packing plant, they saw de Mores sitting up in the roadway, a happy sight indeed, for they thought him dead. De Mores smiled up at them weakly, his patrician features laced with blood from a scalp wound.

"Who is it?" he asked, indicating the body draped in front of Mireles's pommel.

"Friends from the Old Country," said Pryor. "How are you, Mark?"

"One shot grazed my head. The other went through my side between the hip and the ribs. Clean, I think. Nothing bad at all." De Mores shook his handsome curly head. "Why should two continents want to kill a pleasant fellow like myself?"

Pryor helped the Marquis onto his palomino, and they turned back toward

Medora and Dr. Slessinger. . . .

The doctor said, "I've been expecting this, de Mores. Only I anticipated your being in far worse shape than this. You'll live to spend millions more, Antoine."

De Mores nodded, smiling. "I am too tough for this country of yours. They have to import killers from abroad to get me."

Cretain was still senseless as Pryor told Dr. Slessinger about the assassins from France. Then he and Celestino took leave of de Mores, with the Marquis warning them not to ride out of the country without seeing him again.

Pryor and Mireles were mounting in front of the doctor's house when Naton stumbled out of an alley across the street and come toward them in a reeling stagger, dirt-smeared and wild-eyed and soaked with sweat.

"Breason and Mifflin!" he panted. "Heading for the chateau. Shot my horse—under me. But I got away—in the brush. You'd better ride!"

"Thanks, Nate," said the Rio Kid. "De Mores is in the doctor's office—let's go, amigo."

They took off for the chateau in a racing gallop, and Naton weaved onward, to collapse in exhaustion on the porch steps in front of Dr. Slessinger's door.

Lining out of town toward the plateau on which the de Mores manor stood, the two riders kept their mounts at a fast, steady gait, the dust rolling up behind the drumming hoofs. The two big ones, the ones they wanted most, were ahead of them. The U. S. marshals wouldn't find them on the Bible Ranch. It was up to the Rio Kid and Mireles to take them at the Chateau de Mores!

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CHAPTER XI

Showdown at the Chateau

WITH the sunlit landscape skimming past them, the Rio Kid observed irrelevantly what a beautiful shining morning it was, with golden brilliance gilding the gray-green plains and new-leafed trees, the silver-frosted sage and maroon patches of chokecherries. Pink blossoms of bitter root starred the meadows, and purple asters nodded along the roadbanks. A lovely clean spring day, but death and horror stalked the Badlands.

The road smoking behind them, Pryor and Mireles rocketed up the grade and across the bare natural terrace toward the chateau, the dark forests and gaunt hills looming in the background.

It was easy to visualize the scene ahead. The servants and children frightened and locked up somewhere. Big Breason and suave Mifflin sampling drinks at the liquor cabinet, eyeing Medora with frank hunger and lust, gloating over the prospect of this most primitive and cruel means of revenge. Striking at a man they hated through the woman he loved!

In a way, too, it was an admission of defeat, a last and starkly desperate resort on the part of Luke Breason and Cape Mifflin. For, even if the Federal marshals hadn't come, the people of the Badlands would have risen and turned against the Bible for an atrocious deed of this sort. Rough and wild as the frontier country was, it would not stand for the molesting and abuse of a good, virtuous woman.

So Breason and Mifflin were actually abandoning all hope when they reached out greedily for the beautiful Medora de Mores.

Pryor thought, they'll hear and see

us coming. But it doesn't matter. They won't run away from two men. They'll stand and fight, and that is precisely what we want.

There was no sign of life around the chateau, and he wondered if they were too late. But the Bible men might have tethered their horses behind the house.

An unnatural stillness lay on the place. Could Breason and Mifflin have been brutal and murderous enough to massacre the family and servants? Pryor doubted it. They wanted the handsome, full-bodied Marquise alive. They were probably getting ready to carry her off into the woods.

The Rio Kid and the Mexican approached the manor without being challenged or shot at. If the men were still in the house, they were too busy to notice the oncoming horsemen. The Rio Kid kneed Saber to the left, to cut through the front yard, while Celestino Mireles swerved his black to the right, to circle around the back. They rode with reloaded Colts drawn and poised now, eyes sweeping and keenly alert. Still no gunshots crashed out, no sounds issued from the elaborate structure.

The Rio Kid dismounted and left Saber beside the colonnaded porch, pacing forward on foot. He heard voices, laughter, the stomp of hoofs and creak of leather, from the far end of the house. Dropping his hat he edged along the wall to peep around the corner, gun transferred to his left hand.

Before the side door there at the end of the building, Breason and Mifflin had Medora strapped firmly astride the saddle on a spare horse, her feet tied in the stirrups and lashed together beneath the horse's belly. Medora wore a gingham house dress, the skirts hiked high by the saddle, exposing her superb long silken legs well up the thighs. The men were laughing at her embarrassment and discomfiture.

Pryor couldn't fire for fear of hitting her. Luke Breason must have sensed his presence, for he spun and drew with sudden blurred speed, his shot scoring the house corner and spraying splinters over the Rio Kid's cropped chestnut head, as he pulled back.

Medora's mount bolted, with her trying to rein it down from its wild flight toward the woods.

Mireles appeared at the other corner of the chateau, and Cape Mifflin whirled lithely to face him. They fired almost simultaneously, the muzzle-lights leaping and merging between them. Mifflin's horse shied, rearing, and caught the bullet in his chest, screaming and thrashing to the earth. Mifflin dropped behind the horse's bulk and fired again, but Mireles had dived in back of the wooden watering trough at that corner.

Flame torched back and forth as they dueled it out. Mifflin's slugs punctured the trough and water spouted from the ragged holes. Mireles's shots jarred into the dead horse and ripped through saddle gear.

BREASON'S mount ran away after Medora, and Breason plunged through the doorway into the house. Hearing his boots inside, Pryor ducked beneath the window ledges and ran crouching back toward the main entrance. When he slipped in through the front door, Breason was nowhere in sight, the tramp of his boots no longer audible.

The Rio Kid waited in hushed tension, the gun in his right hand now, then prowled forward in the vestibule. At the end of the building the guns of Mireles and Mifflin were still blasting.

Pryor stalked toward the left wing of the mansion and slid into the grand dining room, just as Breason entered from the kitchen. They exchanged swift shots that shattered glassware and crockery, and dodged back out of view once more, leaving the stench of powder in the immaculate polished room. The skulking and stalking went on, a slow, deadly, nerve-wracking business in those great lofty rooms.

Outside the chateau, Celestino Mireles squatted easily behind that trough,

drenched with bullet-splashed water. Scarcely thirty feet away, Cape Mifflin lay prone and blood-spattered in back of his fallen mount. From time to time, one of them would risk a shot, with the other lashing back instantly at the gun flame. Both the horse and the water tub were already well riddled.

Out at the edge of the forest, Medora de Mores had got her mount under control, and was straining downward to undo her bound ankles. Her cheeks were flushed with anger and shame.

An idea occurred to Mireles, which might break this deadlock in his favor. A daring chance, but anything was better than this stalemate. He threw another shot to keep Mifflin pinned down, and withdrew to the rear wall of the building, leading his black up near the corner and trough. Mifflin would be watching the outer edge of the tub, from which Mireles had been shooting.

Climbing aboard the black, Mireles stood erect on the saddle, left hand balanced against the wall, right hand gripping his Colt. The gelding was firm and motionless under him. Leaning forward, Mireles looked around the corner and down at Mifflin, who was partly exposed from this height.

Mifflin's head and gun hand jerked upward—too late. Mireles had already thumbed off his shot, aiming at the raising right shoulder. It slammed home, driving Cape Mifflin back and over in a twisted sprawl, the gun spilling from his fingers.

Past the limit of his balance, Mireles jumped quickly to keep from falling, landing beside the leaking trough and darting forward to cover the man behind the dead horse. Mifflin was out cold, still breathing, but badly wounded, the bullet having smashed through his shoulder in a downward trajectory.

"The theeng now ees to patch heem up, keep heem alive," murmured Celestino Mireles. "Sometimes eet don't make much sense, I theenk."

Inside the house, the grim game of hide-and-seek, hit-and-run, fire-and-fall-back was still in progress, with the Rio Kid and Luke Breason stalking and shooting at one another from one corridor or room to the next. And with considerable damage to Sheraton furniture, Adamesque mirrors and hand-blocked French wallpaper.

Until sudden simultaneous moves and chance brought them face to face across the length of the luxurious library, their guns leaping and flaring, blazing and bucking again, the shattering concussions filling the room, the house, and what seemed like the universe. The Rio Kid had been a split-second the faster, getting his first slug in there solid to that massive, powerful body, barely in time to make Breason miss as the impact jolted him to the heels. And the Rio Kid put his second shot home also, lifting Luke back against a bookcase, the glass panels cracking and tinkling under his sagging bulk.

LUKE BREASON hung there for an instant, gun hand pawing high, an involuntary shot exploding at the ceiling, ripping off shards of plaster and a musical rain of crystals from a cut-glass chandelier. There was utter disbelief in his bitter brute-face, ugly and glowering until fear broke through, as his left hand clawed at his broken chest and came away dripping crimson.

Then Breason stiffened upright, took three weak tottering steps, and pitched full length across the Oriental rugs on the polished hardwood. The crash sent ripples through the swirling gunsmoke.

The Rio Kid turned and walked out the front door, reloading his Colt and running for the far corner. It was a vast relief to find Medora there, swinging down from the mount to which she had been tied, and Mireles standing over a dead horse and the wounded Cape Mifflin.

"You got heem, General?" asked the Mexican.

Pryor inclined his sweaty chestnut head. "Yes, it's all over. —Are you all right, Marquise?"

"Nothing injured but my pride and modesty," said Medora de Mores. "But where is Antoine? Still in jail?"

"No, he was wounded on the way home. But not seriously. He's all right. Ride in to Doc Slessinger's with us, and you'll see for yourself."

"I'll put on a riding-habit this time," Medora said. "It'll take only a minute to change. And I've got to let the children and servants out. Those men locked them all up in the cellar."

"Don't look in the library, Marquise," said the Rio Kid. "I'm afraid we busted up a lot of your things, too."

"That's a shame," Medora scoffed. "You saved me and broke a few trinkets! Don't feel too badly about it, Robert Pryor."

Before she let the children and servants come upstairs, Pryor and Mireles wrapped Breason's body in a blanket and carried it out to the shed. While Medora was changing, the Mexican caught Breason's horse, and they tied the unconscious Mifflin across it. When Medora was ready, they started riding for the town that had been named after her.

By the packing plant they met Marshals Innes and Cowan, back from the Bible on the trail of Breason and Mifflin, and directed them to the bodies of Lenaude and Luke Breason.

"Seems we weren't much needed here after all," Innes said wryly. "About all you left for us to do is pick up and count the dead. But we're obliged to you boys. You did a fine job in cleaning up Little Missouri and the Badlands." He bowed to Medora. "We just talked with your husband, ma'am. He's going to be fine. We also had a few words with Cretain, who told us about the French plot to kill the Marquis. And about Breason, too."

Pryor gestured at Mifflin. "When this one can talk, he'll have a full confession that should cover everything for you, Marshal. You won't need us any more, will you?"

"I reckon not, Captain Pryor."

"Can't you hold them here, on some grounds or other, Marshal?" asked Medora. "Antoine and I don't want to let them go."

Innes smiled. "I'd like to, ma'am, but it's outside my jurisdiction."

The lawmen shook hands, saluted, and went on to get the bodies of Lenaude and Breason.

At Dr. Slessinger's, Medora and de Mores were happily reunited, and the Rio Kid and Mireles finally broke away with great difficulty, the thanks and blessings of the de Moreses riding with them, as they continued southward to see that all was well with the Overbaughs and the Double O.

"Ees always hello, *gracias*, and goodby, General," said Mireles, with a trace of wistful sadness.

"What do you want, amigo? A sheep ranch of your own?" asked Bob Pryor, laughing. "A cantina to settle down and grow fat and lazy in?"

ANOTHER SMASHING NOVEL OF THE PIONEER WEST!

WAR IN WYOMING

Featuring the Rio Kid

By ROE RICHMOND

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"What I want ees a wife weeth a three-meellion dowry," Mireles said. "One that looks just like Medora maybe. Ees not much, General?"

"Might as well set your sights high, Celestino," said Pryor. "Shoot for the moon, and maybe get a star."

AT THE Double O, they found the Overbaughs contented and cheerful in their new security, relieved to learn that Breason was gone and that Mifflin was in custody, the dominance of the Bible Ranch broken and ended. For the first time the Overbaughs were free from fear and oppression, the path ahead of them clear, bright and hopeful.

"I reckon we can raise our sheep and live our lives now," Odin Overbaugh said. "All thanks to you two boys and Mark de Mores. And young Dirk here is sure set on going right along with you."

"Can't I come, Cap'n Bob?" pleaded the youngster. "You saw me ride and shoot. You know I'll make a good hand!"

"In a few years, Dirk," said the Rio Kid, rumpling the boy's tow head. "You stay here and help your dad build up the ranch first. We'll be coming back this way some time, to stop in and see you. If you're old enough by then, maybe we'll take you along, Dirk."

"Sure, I'll work hard, do all I can to help Pop," said Dirk. "I'll grow big and strong and tough like you, quick with a gun and my fists, not afraid of nothing!"

"Attaboy, Dirk," said the Rio Kid. "You stick with the family and help your dad take care of the folks and run the Double O. We'll be seeing you, son."

Bidding the Overbaughs farewell, Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, and Celestino Mireles rode southward out of the Badlands of Dakota, another mission completed successfully. But more was always waiting for them somewhere in the West.

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The outlaw's hand hung just above the butt of his gun

Deadly Decision

By PHILIP MORGAN

Hugh Marlane had to choose between honor and the girl he loved — and he stood to lose either way

SUNLIGHT danced off the window-panes along Trail as Hugh Marlane wheeled the gelding into the street. He was a big man, tall, with square-set, muscle-padded shoulders, and narrow flanks. He sat the horse with the perfect ease of the born horseman. Sun had burned his face a dark brown. The burn made his blue eyes seem much lighter than they actually were. Below the brim of his tipped-back hat his forehead was white where the sun never touched it.

Hugh rode down the street, dropped an occasional greeting to men he passed on the way. Some of these men turned and watched him go, and one of them shook his head sadly. Hugh didn't see

this, and his eyes held a sparkle of pleasure as he thought of Ellen Warrick, whom he hadn't seen for a month. The small schoolteacher was going to marry him next month, and it had been too long since he had seen her. In his happy mood, he failed to notice the tension that held the town.

Coming abreast of the Gypsy Belle Saloon, Hugh saw Sam Gault lounging against one of the poles that supported the porch roof. Gault was a known rustler, and he was rumored to have had a hand in several killings in the county, although this had never been proved. Hugh had no love for the man, even though his Circle L had never taken any cattle losses. Gault's ugly little pardner, Flick McCall, sat tipped back in a chair on the porch.

"Howdy," Gault said insolently. "What brings the big rancher to town?"

Hugh ignored the insult in the man's voice, determined to avoid trouble. Ellen hated trouble and violence, and he didn't want to have her leave him. In the old days, before he had met her, he would have swung down and driven a rock-hard fist into Gault's sneering mouth. "Can't see that it's much of your business, Gault," he finally replied. Gault didn't like that and his mean, little eyes narrowed.

"I got some news you might be interested in, Marlane. Your two-bit sheriff gave me and Flick our walkin' papers this mornin'. He says we're to be out of the country before sundown and stay out. Now ain't that funny?"

HUGH tried to keep the shock of this news from showing on his face and succeeded, but a cold ball of fear settled in his belly, fear for Sheriff Lars Ellis, his friend. Ellis was old and no match for a man like Gault. "You better do like he says," Hugh said. "I wouldn't take it kindly if anything was to happen to Lars."

"Now, wouldn't that just be a shame, though," Gault said and laughed nastily. "I'm shakin' in my boots."

"Maybe you should be," Hugh said and went on down the street, followed by the harsh laughter of Gault and Flick McCall. The laughter made the slow fury crawl up in Hugh Marlane, turning the back of his neck red. This was his town, his people, and he had always held the town's respect. Always before, when trouble came, the town had looked to the Marlanes and the Circle L for leadership. But not now, when the only Marlane was about to marry a girl who hated the thought of violence.

The people knew it, and they looked at Hugh differently. Some of the respect had died. Hugh had talked to Ellen about Sam Gault, seeing this day coming, but she would not be swayed. She told him she could never marry a man with blood on his hands. And wanting her the way he did, he couldn't face the thought of losing her.

Hugh had intended to go straight to Ellen, but now he reined in before the jail, stepped down and went inside. Lars Ellis sat behind the big roll-top desk, carefully cleaning a long-barreled .45. He gave Hugh a hard grin when he looked up. He was a wire-thin, white-haired old-timer with a long, drooping mustache.

"If it ain't the stranger. Where you been, boy?"

"Nursin' cows, Lars," Hugh replied and returned the grin. He slid into a chair, and they exchanged range gossip for awhile. Finally Hugh gave Lars a direct stare and asked bluntly, "That right about you givin' Gault orders to pull out?"

The sheriff would not meet Hugh's gaze, but he nodded. "That's about the size of it."

"What's the matter with you; you gone loco, or somethin'? He'll walk all over you. He's a fast man with a gun, and you haven't drawn on a man in ten years. Don't be a sucker, Lars. It's the break he's been playin' for. With you dead, he'd have the county right where he wanted it."

Ellis shrugged his thin shoulders. "I

know it, but there ain't nothin' else to do. Gault and his bunch shot up a nester down on the flats last week, and all those farmers are threatening to leave the county unless we get some law and order. They'll do it, too, and we can't afford to have 'em leave. They're good for this country, and they deserve some protection. Gault's gone too far this time."

"You gettin' killed won't help 'em any," Hugh said flatly. "Why not round up a posse and do it right. You could find plenty of men."

The old man looked sharply at Hugh, deeply affronted. "You mean you want me to admit I'm scared of a rat like him? What kind of a man do you take me for, Hugh? I fight my own battles. I knew this might happen when I took the job, but I took it anyhow. This is my town, and as long as it is, I won't let some loud-mouthed skunk run it for me."

"All right," Hugh said and came to his feet. Ellis was uncomfortable with him here anyhow. The old man was thinking that he ought to step in and he couldn't. "I'll see you later," he said. "In the meantime, keep out of Gault's way."

HUGH went out to his horse and rode out of town to where a small frame house sat alone in a grove of cottonwoods. There were flowers around the porch and curtains in the window. It was a cheerful house, a woman's house, and it always looked good to Hugh after a time at his womanless ranch. Ellen heard his horse and ran out to greet him. Hugh jumped down and caught her to him and kissed her with a vehemence that shook both of them. When he released her, she leaned back in his arms and laughed up at him.

"Thank goodness you haven't been gone any longer; you'd probably have broken my back."

"I was bein' gentle," he replied, laughing at her. "You're sure lookin' good, honey. Maybe it's because I haven't seen you for a month," he teased.

"You're mean. I wish now I hadn't let you kiss me. Come inside, and I'll find you something to eat." She turned away from him, and he had a chance to admire her trim figure. She was small, but with a full, rounded body, and her face was very near real beauty. She had a hard determination about everything she did and a faith in her own judgment that pleased Hugh.

She had come out here from the East, and she didn't understand the country yet, but she loved Hugh with a deep warmth of feeling. He took a chair and stretched his long legs out in front of him while she put on the coffee. She came back into the room and sat in his lap and ran her fingers through his hair. Hugh kissed her again, but absently, his mind was elsewhere. He was remembering how Sam Gault had sneered at him, knowing he would not fight. And he knew that Gault figured he was yellow.

Then he saw Lars Ellis and the fear that was deeply buried behind those old eyes. In Ellis was an old-timer's stiff pride, and he would never ask for any help. Yet he knew the sheriff wanted his help and needed it desperately. Ellis did not understand, any more than Gault or the other men in town, why Hugh stayed out of it.

Ellis had ridden into this country with Hugh's dad, and they had fought through many a tough battle side by side. Neither had ever refused to help the other. It seemed strange to the sheriff that Bill Marlane's whelp would turn away from him. The sheriff would be wondering if he was yellow. Thinking that, he came to his feet, almost tumbling Ellen in his haste. He paced the room several times and finally stopped in front of her.

"You've heard what's happened?" he asked bluntly.

"No, Hugh," she said, her eyes puzzled.

"Lars Ellis told Sam Gault to get out of the country before sundown tonight,

or he'd kill him. Gault shot that nester down on the flats last week."

"I heard about the shooting," she said. "It was horrible. Sam Gault must be a beast. It's time he was run out of the country."

"He should be run out, all right, but Lars Ellis can't do the runnin'. Sam's too fast with a gun for an old man. If Lars goes up against him, Lars will be killed."

"What are you driving at, Hugh?"

"Just this. I ought to be out there in the street with Lars tonight. He's my friend, and he was my father's friend, and a man should back his friends. Besides, the people of this town have always looked to the Circle L when trouble struck and they expect me to get rid of Gault."

"But if you shot him, that would make you a murderer. Even a man like Gault is entitled to a fair trial. You have to let the law take care of men like him."

"You were raised where there was some law," he replied bitterly. "All you had to do was whistle and a dozen cops came running. But we don't have law out here yet. The only law Gault understands is the law of the fastest gun. Do you want me to stand by and deliberately let an old man be shot down? Are you that cold-blooded, Ellen?"

She was near to tears now, but she held her chin high and defiantly. "I'm not cold-blooded, Hugh, and I don't want Lars Ellis killed, but I can't stand the thought of you having blood on your hands. I wouldn't ever want those hands to touch me."

"The people are saying I'm afraid of Gault, Ellen. You'll find that a little tough to bear. No woman can want a coward." He turned to the door with that and went out to his horse, not waiting for her answer. He swung up and rode back into town, his mind a turmoil. He loved Ellen and the thought of losing her sickened him, yet he owed a duty to Lars Ellis. There was only one hope left to him now and he'd have to try it.

HUGH made his first stop at the mercantile store of Toby Watt. The small storekeeper greeted him warmly when he came in, but Hugh thought he was a little too cordial. "Sure too bad about Lars, Hugh," Watt said sadly. "He won't have the chance of a snowball in hell against Gault. I sure hate to see it happen."

"Maybe it doesn't have to happen," Hugh said. "I think I know a way to beat Gault." He let the words sink in for a minute. "If you and all the other merchants around town got together and went down and talked to Gault, with your shotguns, he'd get out. He couldn't buck the whole bunch of you." Hugh saw Toby's face grow cold and a veil drop over his eyes. He was shutting the idea out without even considering it.

"Well, now, Hugh, that's a pretty big order. After all, we're nothin' but a bunch of storekeepers. That's what we hire Lars for, to keep the peace. If we showed up behind him, Gault would round up a bunch of gunslingers and we'd all be killed."

"But you can't let Lars die without a chance," Hugh pleaded.

"What about you?" Watt asked slyly. "You Marlanes were always plenty handy with a gun. You could go down and call Gault and he'd have to fight. That way he couldn't bring the rest of his gunslingers into it. It'd just be you and him." The words hit home and Hugh was immediately angry. The truth always hurt.

"Never mind about me, Toby. Maybe I'm sick and tired of fightin' the battles for you boys in town. It's time you bought a stack and showed a little guts. I'm through babyin' you." He left the store then, still mad, knowing that what Watt said was right. He hated to admit it even to himself, but he had been trying to crawl out of a job that was his. The merchants couldn't fight a man like Gault. Yet, he had to make this last try to save the love of the girl. There had to be some other way than facing Gault over the barrel of a gun.

But there was no other way.

Hugh saw them all, Ed Frieze, Charley Barnes, Gary Van Ostrand and the rest. It was the same story everywhere. They shrugged their shoulders, or shook their heads and said how sorry they were, but they wanted no part of it. Sam Gault had put the fear of death in them and they would not face him. They were sorry for Lars, but there was nothing they could do. And in the eyes of each of them, Hugh read the knowledge that it should be he who faced Gault, not them.

They knew him, had known his father, and they expected much of him. It had always been the Marlanes' town and nothing had changed. But Charley Barnes was the only man to mention it. He took off his derby, rubbed the sweat band with a dirty handkerchief, and mused, "If your dad was alive, Hugh, he'd walk to the Gypsy Belle and put six slugs in Sam Gault so fast that mean hombre wouldn't know but what lightnin' had struck."

So now Hugh stood in the fading afternoon sunlight with all the hope dead in him. It was plain how it was. Every man in town believed that he was afraid of Gault. A contempt was beginning to creep into their eyes. It didn't matter that they were refusing to fight. That was different. The Marlanes had held an honored position in this county for forty years and he was throwing it away. The contempt wasn't out in the open yet, but if Lars Ellis died before Sam Gault's flaming gun, it would arise and sweep through town like a grass fire. It was still his town, but it wouldn't be tomorrow, if Ellis died.

Hugh stepped to his horse, swung up, and rode down the street, his head bent in thought. He saw Flick McCall standing in the alleyway between the saddle shop and the saloon, plainly on guard. McCall was Gault's man and he was out there to make sure that Gault was not surprised. If Gault had been sure that Ellis was coming alone, he wouldn't have taken that precaution.

The knowledge pleased Hugh. He knew then that Gault wasn't sure of him, wasn't sure at all. Gault didn't think he was going to step in, but he wasn't positive and he had enough respect for Hugh's toughness to put McCall out here now. Hugh laughed at McCall when he rode by and the little man shifted his feet uncertainly.

COMING abreast of the jail, Hugh almost reined in to make a last plea to Lars. But he finally decided against it, knowing that it would do no good. The old-timer had his strict sense of honor and he would live up to his promise to the outlaw. He would run Gault out of town, or he would die. The knowledge that the old man would never back down sent a sharp tingling up Hugh's spine.

He saw his father then, riding straight and high in the saddle, never letting fear touch him. His dad had always told him that a man did what had to be done, or he was no longer a man. That thought jarred him and jerked him erect in the saddle. Putting spurs to the gelding, he went rocketing down the road to Ellen's. He pulled in, but didn't get down, and she came out onto the porch.

"Ellen, I've got somethin' to say that you won't like, but it has to be said. I'm going with Lars tonight. I regret that you feel the way you do, but I can't let it change my mind. You don't understand how it is out here.

"The law isn't anything beyond the will of the strongest man in the county and for years we Marlanes have been the strongest. We saw to it that there was peace in the county so a man could raise a family decently. But then you came along and you told me fightin' was always wrong. The outlaws soon saw I wouldn't fight and they moved in like the vultures they are. That's something that couldn't have happened before and I'm ashamed of it, as my father would be ashamed."

"Hugh, don't," she began, but he cut

her off before she could speak.

"You tried to make me into something I wasn't, Ellen, something I could never be. A man has to do what he thinks is right, no matter what anyone else thinks, even you. I have to stand on my own two feet. These people have counted on me for years and I can't let 'em down. I just about made a bad mistake, a mistake I'd never have forgotten. Thank God I came to my senses. You don't want a man, Ellen, you want a spineless coward who'd run from his own shadow. So-long."

Ellen called after him, but he did not turn back. He rode to the foot of Trail, intending to go to Lars's office to join him. They would walk to the Gypsy Belle and settle this matter with Gault once and for all. Knowing he had lost Ellen, he felt dead inside, yet he never doubted his decision. A man can't go against his nature and if a woman doesn't want him that way, she shouldn't take him at all. If she changes him, she has nothing. Even so, it was going to be awfully lonely without her. He pulled onto Trail then and saw that he was too late. Lars was already in the street and almost down to the Gypsy Belle.

Hugh spun the horse and raced around to the alley. He cut into the alley at a dead run and now Ellen was forgotten. He was a fighting man thinking ahead, planning. But there was no time. He had one stray thought, wondering where Flick McCall was. Sliding his horse to a stop, he jumped down and went through the back door of the saloon into Mark Fuller's office.

The saloonkeeper wasn't there and Hugh went across the small room in three strides, moving soft and easy. He opened the door into the saloon just as Lars Ellis came through the swinging doors and faced Sam Gault, who lounged against the bar, a cynical smile on his tough face. Neither of them saw him as Hugh moved softly into the room.

"I told you to get out of town," Lars said quietly. "It's sundown; you goin', Sam?"

The outlaw straightened and his right hand hung just above the butt of his gun. "I'm still here, ain't I? You think a stove-up old reprobate like you can scare me. Hell, Ellis, I'll kill you before you get your gun out of leather."

Both men were silent then, tense and waiting. Lars had long ago figured his chances here and knew that when he drew he was dead. He was thinking, probably of other and better times, when Sam Gault wouldn't have dared pull on him. But he was getting ready to have his try. Right then Hugh dropped his words into the silence, like stones cast in a quiet pool. "When you reach for your gun, you're dead, Sam."

The outlaw's head jerked around savagely and when he saw Hugh, his jaw sagged in surprise and he stood staring stupidly. "What you doin' here, Marlane. I thought that woman of yours had you home dryin' dishes." As the outlaw talked, he recovered some of his bravado.

"They're all done and so are you," Hugh said and moved forward further into the saloon. He wheeled to face Gault squarely, relaxed, a reckless smile on his face. "Just watch the door for McCall, Lars; I'll handle Gault."

"It ain't your fight," the outlaw said. "Keep out of it, or I'll blow your guts out."

"You talk too much, Sam. Either make a play, or get your horse and ride out. Make up your mind, or I'll shoot you where you stand."

Gault didn't like it. He was a tough fighter and there was no fear in him now, but he knew another fighter when he saw one and he saw one here. He was weighing his chances and he didn't like them. This big man before him had all the danger signals of a fast man with a gun.

Gault relaxed and smiled. "All right. No need to get on your high horse, Marlane. I'll leave the country." That was the end of it. Gault wasn't going to try it. Hugh felt a wave of relief flood over him as he thought what this meant. Now

he could have Ellen. But then he caught a vague flicker of motion out of the corner of his eye and uttered a swift curse as he remembered Flick McCall. The little gunman had slipped into the back room and thrown down on him.

HUGH dove for the floor as McCall's gun boomed. The slug burned along his back like a branding iron. Hugh palmed up his gun and snapped a shot at McCall just as the lamplight went out. He heard McCall crash backwards and then he rolled away, expecting a shot from Gault's gun. But nothing happened and he knew that Lars had shot out the saloon's only lamp. Now the three of them were penned here in the darkness for a deadly duel to the death.

"Gault took cover behind the bar," Lars announced. No shot followed and Hugh was certain that Gault was waiting for him to answer. He kept quiet and considered. The bar was some forty feet long and open at both ends. Gault probably had gone over the top in a huge jump and there was no way of knowing where he was now.

Hugh went forward slowly, standing, but bent almost double, his gun jutting ahead. He reached the bar and went along it to his right until he came to the end. He crouched now, sure that Gault had to be in the narrow way back of the bar. Hugh intended to wait the outlaw out, but he never had had much patience and he soon grew restless.

He suddenly bunched his muscles and went forward in a long dive, hitting on his side and thumbing off a shot down the narrow slot. Gault's gun boomed in reply and the slug splinted the floor ahead of Hugh. The flash of Gault's gun showed the man crouched at the bar's far end and Hugh came to his knees, thumbing the hammer of his gun, the shots blending into one terrible roar. No gun answered him and he came cautiously to his feet and moved down the bar. Sam Gault lay in a crumpled heap, dead. Hugh holstered his gun and said, "It's all over, Lars. Get us some light."

When the lamp was going, Hugh examined Flick McCall and found that his slug had taken the little outlaw above the heart. He turned away and went out of the saloon with Lars and across the street to the sheriff's office. He was feeling low and his nerves were jumpy, as they always were after a fight. He tried not to think of Ellen, but her lovely face kept rising before his eyes tantalizingly. He talked to Lars for awhile and finally stood up and went to the door.

"I better be ridin' out home, Lars."

"What about Ellen, Hugh?"

"That's all over," he said and stepped outside. The lamplight from the office had momentarily blinded him and he didn't see the girl waiting beside his horse until he was almost upon her. Then he pulled up quickly. "Ellen, what're you doing here?"

"I came to tell you that I still love you, Hugh. I still want to marry you."

He knew what a terrible struggle this had been for the girl and he asked humbly, "What made you change your mind?"

"Why," she said surprised, "I didn't change it. I didn't want you to kill anyone. I thought I couldn't marry you, if you did, but I was wrong. I love you and that's all that will ever matter. I found that I would come to you no matter what you did. That was what I didn't know. The past hour, waiting for you, not knowing if you were alive, has been horrible." She came against him then and pulled his head down. He kissed her roughly and her lips responded just as roughly.

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The saloonman was no hero, and he knew

it would take nothing less to save the

little girl from the madman who had her

The Low

Mason was locked in a death grip with Napa

CHALK BLUFF'S Eldorado Street was cluttered with light wagons and tail-swishing horses. The lower end of the street was darkened by the shadow of a saddle-back ridge, but the skinny cottonwoods in front of the KS Saloon added only pencil thin streamers of shade to the dusty, heat-riddled street.

The KS Saloon was crowded with

Level of Eternity

By A. A. BAKER

afternoon drinkers. Cowmen and hayhands were leaning heavily on the bar for talk, while their women held the Saturday meeting at the preacher's white cottage. The groceries had been ordered, the broken harness dropped off for the blacksmith. The feed store hummed with activity. The poker tables in the dim saloon crackled with bone chips and the heavy ring of silver coins.

K. S. Brown's bass voice rumbled as he tied a clean white apron around his tall lean frame. "I had figured on naming it the Eightgun Saloon, at first," he said, grinning at a squat cattleman.

Davis rose to the bait. "There ain't such a gun. Now you might mean sixgun, Brownie, but there ain't any eightshot pistols I know of."

"That's how I had her figured, friend," the saloon-owner's voice teased. "Six shots of liquor for a dollar and two more on the house. Shoot a dollar for eight drinks. I figured cowmen, being they're always looking for a bargain, would want to fill up on more'n they could handle."

"Yeah, cowmen. Cowmen gotta have bargains." The speaker's voice was cold, and broke the good-humored tone of conversation. His flat statement shot through the relaxed room like a lead slug against an iron hitching-post. Wary eyes rose under the broad-brimmed hats and men moved uneasily in their chairs as they stared at the speaker. Wes Mason stared back, then laughed derisively. He shifted his lame leg and hooked the flat heel of his miner's boot onto the rail.

"Cowmen think they gotta have grazing rights covering the whole danged country, too." Mason's words hung in the silence until Davis met their challenge.

"Meant to talk to you about that, Mason. My blue bull dropped into one of your open mining pits. There'll be a law one of these days that'll force them pits to be covered."

"I got my own law, Davis." The miner suddenly lifted his whisky glass and the liquor caught a beam of sunlight as he sprayed it into Davis's face.

The cowman backed away from the bar, wiping the whisky from his face with the dangling ends of his neckerchief. The aromatic fumes of the spilled whisky flooded the area.

Mason set down the empty glass and drew an ivory-handled sixgun. "Keep your cows outa that section." His eyes narrowed as he laid the gun next to his glass.

"Take that gun off the bar," Brown's voice crackled. "I said, put that gun away." His hand reached for the knotted bar towel.

Mason laughed. "Let Davis do his own fighting, you—"

The bar towel caught him swiftly. It uncoiled with a vicious whip and the

knot in the cloth brought out flaring welts after each resounding, wet slap.

Mason staggered out of reach of the flailing cloth and smashed against the iron stove. A barrel-chested collie dog reared from under the stove and slashed at the miner's face. Growling, the dog caught the miner's shirt collar and reared back. The bar owner hurried around and yanked the dog half off its feet, then held it by the studded collar. The dog continued to snap and bark hoarsely while Mason climbed to his feet and stared around the saloon.

HE LOOKED like the central actor in a nightmare. Blood trickled down into his pepper-colored whisker stubble. "Brown . . ." The word was a sibilant, hate-filled whisper escaping from the slit of Mason's swelling mouth. "I'll see you rot like them cows in the mine pits. I'll see you—"

"That's about all of that kind of talk I'll take," Brown snapped out. "Threaten all you want in the time you got left to get outside. Now get, before I let Napa, here, loose to take your other ear off." The dog lunged without stopping its hoarse barking.

Mason glared at the sly grins appearing on the men and sidled swiftly toward the batwings. He paused, and his flat eyes swiveled toward Davis.

"You first, cowman. I'm gonna get you, Davis. I'm gonna get you where it hurts. For what I aim to do, I won't need my gun. Live happy, Davis, for the short time you got left to live happy." His pale eyes shimmered, and he was gone.

In the following silence, the men could hear the startled snort of his horse as the bit gouged deep. They heard the thud of racing hoofs.

"Pot's still open," droned a card player.

"I'm in. Still looking for a bargain," chuckled another. The tension broke and the men laughed and settled down to sweat out the heat.

"Take Napa out back, Shorty," Brown directed his swamper standing nearby.

He watched the dog being led through the back door, then turned thoughtfully to his station behind the bar. As he shucked the cartridges out of the sixgun, he listened to the continued throaty barks of the dog. Davis interrupted his thoughts.

The squat cowman sounded angry. "It ain't that I didn't appreciate it, Brownie. It's just that I figure I'm old enough to fight my own battles. That gun didn't scare me none. If'n I'd had half a chance I'd of handled him."

"Tee . . ." The saloon owner tucked the empty gun below the bar and hooked the knot of the towel in the brass ring. "You're old enough, and stout enough, to take a slug anytime you want. Just don't get that slug in my saloon. Let me tell you something." Brown's voice rose. "Running a saloon is like any other business. Groceries is sold in a store, but they don't do any gun-fighting in Olde's Emporium. Somebody throw pickles in your face down there and Olde'd run him out of the store. Try going into Simmons's Harness Shop and fighting. Hah, you'd end up in the jug. Them fellas is business men and don't allow it. Same thing follows here. Just 'cause we sell liquor don't mean we got to have fighting and killing."

He chuckled and pointed toward the window. "They don't have no fighting down at the preacher's. Looks like they're breaking up their meeting. Okay, folks, last drink on the house." He pushed the bottle toward the still ruffled cowman and lowered his voice. "Will you stay a minute, Tee? Got something I'd like to talk over. Sort of a community problem."

Davis grabbed the bottle with rope-gnarled hands and nodded. The two watched the saloon empty as the men hurried away on last minute business before meeting their families. Brown spoke.

"Ever notice how a room shrinks up, especially a barroom, when folks leave all together? Makes those left behind

feel a little lonesome, don't it?

"Like a dogie left behind the herd," Davis agreed and rolled his drink around reflectively.

"That's Mason's trouble," Brown said.

"His trouble's just started!" Davis said angrily.

"Now, let me finish," K. S. Brown soothed. "Mason's trouble, his real trouble I mean, is that he's the only mining man left in what's become cattle country. Since the Gypsy Shaft Mine failed, Mason's been slowly settling. Coming apart at the seams, like the shafts that're settling and coming apart in the Gypsy Mine. It's all cows 'round here now." Brown ruffled his fine black hair fretfully. "Don't know if I'm saying what I mean, but it's like this. Mason's working up against a boilerful of steam ever since his mine failed. Cows are making money, but Mason's broke.

"Few years ago, it was the other way 'round. Mining was paying big but cows was just holding on. Y'see, I know something about mines and miners. I was the last man dug out when the Big Strike Mine caved in." He rubbed his head with an exploring hand. "Still got bumps on my head. Every time somebody'd drop a pick or a drill, I'd straighten up too fast." He expanded his chest. "It's mighty nice to breathe deep and quit worrying about the roof coming down."

BROWN paused in remembrance, and the room faded away. He recalled every detail of that last shift in the Big Strike. How cold the midnight air had been. How the wind whipped his jacket as he entered the changing room. Then, the plunging race of the skip to reach the depths where the warmth was cloying and stagnant. He had been holding the drill while Charlie Hopkins deftly tamped with his chipped, ten-pound hammer. They had heard the air start moving from some lower drift, then the blow of the walls. It had been like kneeling inside a walnut shell while a giant crushed the hulls together. The rocks pushing against his body, slowly and inexorably, the snap of his legs when the bones let go. . . .

"Mason's done in this country." Tee's voice routed the memory of that night of horror.

"That's it, Tee," Brown agreed. "Mason's done, but he won't admit it. Instead of accepting the fact, like the other miners done, he's hanging on and for just one reason. He's filled with hate and thoughts of revenge. He even blames the cowmen for the failure of his mine. That's why he was so ready to pick a fast fight with you." Brown's eyes pinned the round blue ones before him. "Tee, I didn't like that threat. I didn't like the look on his face when he made it."

"Don't worry about me," growled the cowman. "He's the one heading for trouble. Next time I'm carrying a gun." He smiled suddenly and turned his head toward the sound of the insistent barking in back.

"Seen a funny thing the other night, Brownie. A side-loppin' coyote went racing by me. Took a slash at my horse, then dipped into the tamarack. Right behind him was Napa, both going lickety-split. Well, I just got my horse calmed down and back they come. Only *this* time the coyote was chasing Napa. Never saw a dog move so fast."

"Go on!" grunted the surprised saloon owner. "Why, that dog never run from nothing before. He's the most vicious animal I ever saw—" He broke off, then added, "Up to about a week ago. He'd mind fine, but I never could pet him. Now I have trouble, come to think of it, to keep from stepping on him. He lays in darks corners and follows me all over. It's downright spooky. If he gets any more affectionate, he won't be worth a dang as a watchdog." A frown creased his forehead. "He sure got riled when Mason scared him out from under the stove. He ain't missed a bark since."

Davis's eyes lifted to the window. "Old woman's coming up the street. She's got little Jessica with her." He

swallowed his drink and grinned awkwardly. "Is it all right if I leave by the back? She says I'm not to be seen coming out of a saloon. Kid's too young."

"See you next trip, Tee?" Brown shouted after the retreating cowman's back.

"Yep. Couple of weeks be in again."

Brown heard his hasty steps pass the stacked barrels to come around the boardwalk where he met his wife and daughter.

The days unfolded evenly. The country was so big and so widely dotted with ranches, that time traveled slowly over the flats and ridges between the sprawling cow land. News drifted in about a wreck on the Union Pacific over by Blewett. A summer fire burned over the Indian lands and drove the deer down to pasture with the cattle.

Brown heard of Davis only once in the two weeks. A hayhand rode in for a factory-built gear for his binder, and stopped for a drink. He told a rambling story about one of Tee's dogs lying down in the cool water of the cattle trough and how the thirsty cattle bunched down and lowered the water level so quickly, the dog was trapped for several days in the tank.

Brown heard nothing of the miner, Mason. However, reports drifted through about a lead strike in the Sneak Mountains, over in Colorado, and he figured that Mason had likely made the trip. He was still disturbed about the man's parting threat, and the look that went with it, and hoped that this was the case. There was talk drifting in about rabies hitting cows on the southern range but every summer this kind of talk became general. Heat drove all kinds of animals mad. It didn't have to be rabies.

THE two weeks passed, and the town of Chalk Bluff got ready for the usual gathering of the ranchers. Simmons displayed his latest express shipment of kangaroo leather riding gloves. Olde shined the gleaming coffee grinder. Brown sprinkled his floor with new sawdust. Even the mayor got out the water wagon and wet down the dust around the church and halfway up Eldorado Street.

Davis strode into the KS Saloon. Draped about his heavy hips was a cartridge-studded gun belt. The muzzle poked through the leather holster. He swaggered a bit as he slapped a dollar onto the bar.

"Have the first drink with me, Brownie." Davis eyed the half-filled room and Brownie laughed quietly.

"Mason ain't here, Tee. You won't need all that artillery. Say," he added, "remember that coyote story you told me?"

"Story, hell, that happened. It was your dog, too."

"All right, Tee, I'll go along. That dog's changed, so maybe he *did* run from the coyote. What I was about to say was, don't you go getting in the same fix. You come chasing Mason with a gun and—"

"And he's liable to turn and start after me?" Davis finished. "Well, maybe that's what I want him to do."

The red liquor gurgled pleasantly from the bottle and the two men raised a silent toast. A toast they never drank.

The sound of pounding boots slashed through the quiet of the room. It wasn't the measured speed of a hurrying man who can hold his news, letting each foot hit carefully on the boardwalk. It was, instead, the urgent running of desperation. Of a speeding messenger willing to gamble on a broken leg in order to gain a second in the delivering of that message.

The preacher's man shot into view. He was shouting before the batwings snapped open.

"Tee— Mason's got your littlest girl! He come up—'fore anybody knew it. Hoisted Jessica onto his running horse and is right now heading out over the Saddlerock. There!"

The men sped to the window and stared out. The tiny figure of a red

horse, far enough away to appear as though through the reverse end of a field glass, disappeared over and into the brush that flourished on the Saddlerock.

"Heading for the Gypsy Shaft!" shouted Brown. He ran behind the bar and shuttled a rifle out toward Davis, then strapped on a single sixgun. "Shorty!" he yelled. "Get out back and loose Napa." He reached through the clutter behind the change box, found his Bowie knife and clipped it onto his gun belt. Looking up he saw the running back of the cowman.

"Tee! Come back here, take this rifle!"

"That crazy devil!" Davis's voice was almost out of control. "If he hurts her—If that crazy fool hurts Jessica—"

"No time for threats," muttered the fast moving Brown. "Let's get out to the livery barn. They'll still have horses saddled. If he ever gets into that mine, there'll be hell to pay."

They mounted, and as they raced by the church, huddled groups broke and shouts went up as other men ran to mount. Ten minutes after the preacher's man brought the news, a dozen horsemen were on the miner's trail. The collie raced behind.

When they reached the rotted buildings that housed the surface workings of the mine, the men dismounted and Brown issued swift orders. He had to shout over the hoarse barking of Napa who had raced past the group and into the hollow building.

"He's holed up here," Brown told them. "There's his horse at the trough. You, Mike! Hurry over to the County Seat and bring the sheriff. You others, get set by every mine entrance." He paused, sucked air into his chest like a man who is going under water. "I'm going in after Mason."

Grimly he halted Davis's quick protest. "Only chance is for one man. Otherwise, he'd maybe kill a dozen. One man's got a chance and I'm that one. All of you have families. I haven't. I'll take Napa in there with me."

AN OLD man stepped forward. "Don't be a fool!" His was the solemn voice of a Welshman. "There's thousands of traps in that pit. The vein went many ways, and shafts and rifts followed the vein. That's why it was named Gypsy. There's another trouble. About two mile back under, there's an underground limestone structure. Catacombed like them Kentucky caves, 'cepting it's mostly mud. Tunnels of mud." The old man paused and repeated his warning. "Don't be a fool, man. Mason's mad, but he knows what's underneath. You don't. The little girl ain't in danger unless there's a fight. Wait'll the sheriff comes."

Brown snorted. "We could wait, but then what? Could the sheriff talk him out of there? Mason hates the sheriff like he hates cows. Mason's hate is something you wouldn't understand, oldtimer. We can't let Tee's littlest alone with that hate." He raised his voice. "Don't forget now. Get men at each mine entrance. No, Davis . . ." Brown turned to the pleading, white-faced father. "You stay here. Anyway—" he smiled grimly—"it'll take a thin string bean like me."

There were more protests, but Brown strode away and entered the boxlike building that housed the aged lift. They heard the barking stop as the door slammed, then the squeal of rusty hinges as he lifted the covering over the shaft.

The building was gloomy. Small filters of sunlight bloomed out, only to retreat before they struck the ground. The metal of the winch and wire hoistlines were dull with rust. As Brown's hands clutched the ladder, the grime was dislodged and he could hear its free fall into the wet darkness far below. He turned his head and clucked his tongue for Napa but the dog was gone. He had evidently entered the sloping shaft.

Slowly the lean man worked his way down the ladder. A hundred steps below the surface he found the broken skid

elevator. It was wedged tightly and he had to work his way through the open trap door in the skip's floor to find the creaking ladder again. He could hear the new rumbling growl of Napa, somewhere in the darkness ahead.

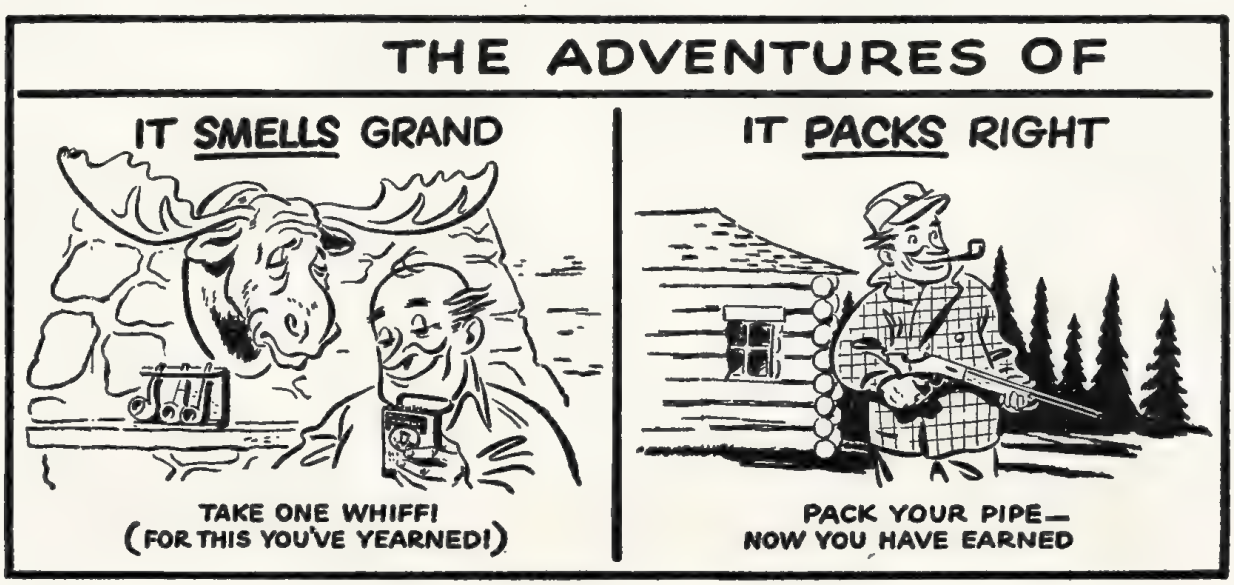
Brown paused, tried to still his heaving chest. The floor of the skip cut off any light from above and his eyes strained to penetrate the soft darkness all about him. It was completely still, and Brown wondered if Mason and the child were really down here or if the surface buildings might have appealed as a better hideout.

He waited and listened. Gradually the dead sounds of the abandoned mine took on eerie life. A chunk of dirt fell and he heard the gurgly splash of oily water. There were echoes, and then the slithering noise of a dirt slide. A creaking timber, left to eternity, its yielding back braced through the years and holding tons of weight, gave an inch and let off a sigh. Moisture beaded Brown's forehead. He thrust the memory of the Big Strike from his mind, shifted his gun belt and descended. His feet struck heavily as he reached the bottom. He moved carefully away from the ladder and felt for the rails of the dump car.

Cautiously he lit a match and let its searching fingers seek out footprints. He was bending for a closer look when the sump areaway suddenly erupted in a thunderous explosion, and Brown staggered about in utter bewilderment. His first thought had been of a gas explosion, then he heard the retreating whine of a sixgun slug as it ricocheted down the tunnel.

His light went out as it dropped in a puddle of water, and he backed up against the rails, pressing his body tight to the six-inch rusty iron. Silently he drew his own gun and saw the shiny barrel twinkle in an errant ray of light. He lowered the muzzle and rubbed soft clay over the barrel. Then he remembered he couldn't shoot because of Davis's "littlest girl." Fuzzily, he tried to remember what she looked like, then heard the creaking leather of retreating boots. Mason was sneaking away and Brown edged his face above the rail and listened. He could hear the man's heavy breathing and wondered if the little girl were already dead, or hidden somewhere while Mason returned to kill his pursuer.

With almost frantic suddenness, Brown hated the darkness. The cloying, soggy, dead earth, seeping water like a drenched graveyard. In the graveyard, the water seeped deep through the coffins, but here it strangled the air that was needed for life. He hated the tons of muck that hung overhead and



carried the threat of suffocation. Tons of wet earth held in place by aging timbers.

Panic consumed him. Every instinct told him to get back up that ladder but, at the top of the ladder, Davis was waiting. How could he crawl out without the little girl?

In that moment, he heard the child's whimper. He edged forward and was suddenly confronted by the furious sound of an animal in the grip of a convulsion. The child started to scream. Hollow screams that intermingled with the slashing teeth and the deep, crazy growlings of the big collie. He fought down the desire to get up and rush forward. Somewhere up ahead the child was hidden and a crazy animal was chewing through wood to reach her. He forgot about Mason and moved to his feet.

BROWN'S thoughts were confused. Why was Napa trying to get at the girl? He remembered the coyote then, and the talk of rabies-infected cows. He recalled Napa's strange behavior in the past weeks and shuddered. Brown's head whirled with the certain knowledge that Napa had been infected. He was after a mad man, and now, a mad dog. Then, the completed thought sequence struck home. Napa had bitten Mason on the cheek. God, he thought, if only it wasn't so dark!

Gritting his teeth, Brown loosened the rawhide from his gun holster. He made a small loop and edged toward the sounds. His groping hand struck the splintered boards of a tool box. He again heard the frightened whimper of the child and realized she was still safe. He held the noose and felt for the fur of the maddened dog. His hands grasped the hot ruff of fur at the neck and swiftly he straddled the dog's back as it whirled in an effort to bite. The noose slipped over the wet, foamy muzzle, and with frantic fingers, he felt to see if the noose had caught both jaws. The teeth locked in convulsion as he drew the rawhide fast.

Brown fought down the desire to open the lid of the coffinlike tool box. Mason was still loose and he had a hundred pounds of rabid dog to hold down. His only chance, for the girl's safety, would be to get between the tool box and Mason. He discarded the thought of letting light from his flaring sixgun seek out Mason. Now was the time to move forward, before the strain made him lose courage.

Brown ducked his head close to the ties and slipped away from the tool box, dragging the struggling Napa be-

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

—HAPPINESS FOR ALL CONCERNED!
—with Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.

It costs no more to get the Best!

hind him. Suddenly he heard the harsh breathing of Mason, heard him move away. Brown followed, his face dripping with perspiration.

How far he crawled, he could never remember. A rat scrambled down from a timber and scurried away. The deadly darkness softened, and he knew the shaft had entered a cave. Now, behind him, the girl was safe—as long as he was safe. Napa was weaving his head around but the convulsion had passed and he seemed to be trying to follow the rawhide leash. Regret, for Napa, touched Brown, then he heard the crazy shout.

THE shout had no words, but telegraphed danger. Brown crouched against a rock and waited in half-panic as tons of loose mud slithered around his legs and crept up his body. An eternity, ripe with suffocation and death, passed, and the mud stopped. Napa went into another convulsion, and the slippery rawhide was squeezed through Brown's fingers.

The dog slashed out as he leaped past the half-covered man, but the improvised muzzle hadn't loosened enough to give the teeth freedom, and wetness swiped his neck harmlessly before the dog was gone. Now, somewhere ahead, the mad dog and man were together.

Brown lay on his side and thrust an arm through a muddy opening. His fingers explored the spongy mud walls. He pulled his hat low, to keep the slime out of his collar, and pressed himself into the opening. His gulping lungs forced his rib cage into the decaying earth. His teeth clamped together in effort, and he hissed, knowing that once the air was expelled, his lungs would collapse under their muddy weight. He tried to hold his reeling senses together by drawing a little of the expelled air back quickly. He pushed his feet against the wall and felt the mud curl away.

Slowly, he eased forward and fought free of the sucking mud. He could hear it slide away. He spread his arms wide. Nothing. How deep or wide the chamber was, he couldn't tell. Yet, somehow, he knew Mason was near.

Brown knew little Jessica would be safe from Mason as long as he held his position in front of the mud-clogged passage. The dog was about finished. He knew that such violent convulsions were quickly followed by paralysis. The pang of regret returned.

His cave was suddenly rent by the bellows of a man in the grip of a violent death. The screaming shouts were quickly absorbed by the muddy walls, and Brown stumbled in surprise. He glared around but could see nothing. The screams were joined by the death keening of the rabies-infected dog.

Brown couldn't stand it. He fired, and the flash of the explosion lighted up the slimy walls. He saw Mason locked in a death grip with Napa. Brown moved in and fired until the dulled explosions blasted his senses. He emptied the gun into the dog.

Eons passed, and Brown leaned heavily against the wall of the underground cave. A light flared, and he turned dull eyes to the mud-covered opening. Then he bent and shouted. He heard words drift back. "He's in here!" Sluggishly, the mud gave way as the sheriff's men, beyond the cave, dug him out.

He made the long climb back up the ladder and emerged into the sunlight. It came as a surprise. It was still afternoon of the same day. Several men struggled behind him with the canvas-wrapped body that was Mason. Another carried Napa in a feed sack. Davis's littlest girl was held tightly in her father's arms. She was solemnly wiping the drying mud from her party dress. The small face was streaked with tears and mud, the small fingers busy.

"Tee . . ." Brown's voice was deep with thought, and the men quieted to hear. "Tee, maybe I was wrong. Next time anybody wants to gunfight in my saloon—I don't think I'll interfere. A good clean killin', right out in the daylight, don't seem so bad." ● ● ●

By SYL MacDOWELL

EARLY settlers in the vast timberlands of the Pacific Northwest lived in constant fear of forest fires. The coming of expertly trained firefighters, good roads and fast automobile transportation has banished most of that danger to human lives.

An Oregon old-timer returned recently to his old homeplace on the Siuslaw, a densely-wooded area in the Coast Range.

"You folks who live here now don't realize how helpless we were in the old days. A billow of smoke in the sky panicked everybody for miles around. They'd leave their farms and settlements and camp in droves along some river.

"Sometimes those early fires would burn unchecked for weeks and it was on account of one of those terrifying experiences when I was a youngster that I pulled out of this country.

The Roar of Flames

"It was about fifty years ago, during a dry summer. A logging outfit, burning spruce slash out near the coast, let their burning get out of control. Our family, and all our neighbors loaded up wagons with all the supplies we had, then made for the river, driving out cattle sheep, and horses ahead. By the time we got to the river, near Mapleton, the smoke was dense. We could hear the roar and crackle of flames, and the cannonading of giant trees exploding from the terrific heat.

"Wild critters of the woods got to the river ahead of us. Not only deer and elk and bears, but predatory varmints—cougars and bobcats and wolves. Even snakes. It looked like the unloading of Noah's Ark.

"Natural enemies though they were, they didn't seem to fear one another. They shared a greater fear of their common enemy, fire, and even huddled together.

A Darkening Sky

"When the flames came, racing through the tops, we took to the water, covering our heads with wet blankets, surrounded by all manner of creatures, wild and domestic, fierce and frightened. The sky darkened, almost like night. With the smoke and heat, we barely could breathe. The noise was like a battle, a sound I'll never forget, with the bawling of cattle and wailing of children mixed into it.

"After awhile, the river turned black with ash and debris and the water warmed gradually until it was almost unbearably hot. Dead fish swirled around in the debris. Father got a dead salmon, cut it into strips and we ate it raw on the second day. It took nearly four days for the fire to pass and the hellish desolation that was left to cool off. In that time we saw and heard some of our neighbors as they died a horrible death.

Progress Has Been Made

"A lot of progress has been made since then, what with fire-towers, multiple mechanized plows to make fire breaks, radio-equipped trucks and air patrols. But I think the biggest thing is the law that forbids the burning of slash until the first fall rains.

"Yes, this is one of the most beautiful places on earth. But I still dread fire. There's no disaster worse than a forest fire, nothing in which man and beast is so helpless, and can suffer so much."

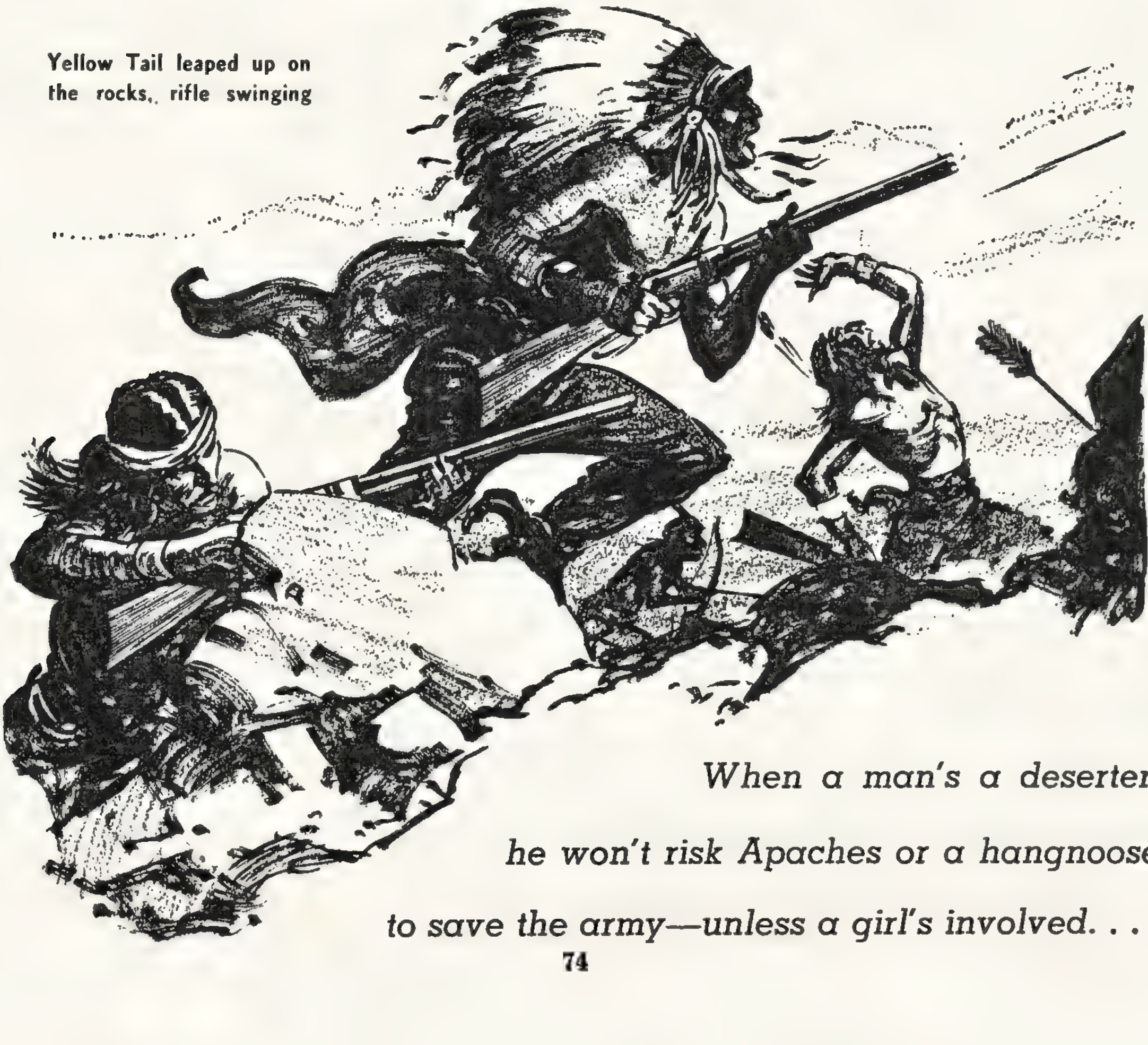
Measure for Courage

CHAPTER I

The Fugitive

JIM TATE dropped the reins of the gray and silently moved away. He held his head slightly back with his eyes half-closed and listened to the night sounds.

The dry wind swept up from the desert far below and rustled the scrub



Yellow Tail leaped up on the rocks, rifle swinging

When a man's a deserter,

he won't risk Apaches or a hangnoose

to save the army—unless a girl's involved. . . .

a novelet by

GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

oak and junipers that lined the canyon walls. Jim walked slowly forward, planting each booted foot carefully toe first and letting the heel touch the sand silently. To his right the canyon dropped into dense shadow. To his left was the towering wall that marked the south side of Deep Canyon. Behind him was the winding gorge that led deep into the Grindstones.

Jim shoved his hat back and examined the stage road that clung to the side of the canyon. To the west and far below him was the flat desert floor with the stage road winding across the moon-silvered sands, each saguaro and mesquite standing out starkly. It was quiet except for the ceaseless voice of the wind. There was no

Apache sign. It looked like the rest of his way to Deep Canyon swing station was clear.

Still Jim took no chances. He had seen Apaches rise up like demons from a flat desert floor, throwing aside earth-colored gray blankets, to attack a wagon train. They had a phrase for it. *Tloh-ka-dih'-nadidah-hae.* Rise-from-the-grass. No one, not even a skilled army scout like Jim, could be sure of traveling across the Big Land unobserved.

Jim looked back into the depths of the canyon. It had been a nerve-wracking ride of thirty miles through a silent country under the grip of terror. For Coletto Amarillo, Yellow Tail, was loose with his band of bronchos again.

Jim had ridden through canyon country, not only watching for Apache sign but expecting to see a squad of troopers riding hard after him. For Sergeant Cluskey lay dead on the hard-packed earth of the corral at Fort Devoe with one of his own bullets in his hand.

He and Jim had fought when Jim's craw had been filled with the sergeant's rawhiding. Cluskey had drawn but Jim had moved in like a great lean cat before Cluskey could shoot. The trigger had been squeezed in the silent deadly struggle and Cluskey had ended twenty years' service with his own sidearm.

JIM spat. The army took care of its own. No one would ever believe it had been self defense. Captain Folger would send big Lieutenant Heston after Jim. Apaches or no, Jim would be trailed clear to California. C Troop was tough and tightly knit and even though Cluskey had been a hardcase he had held the respect of the men he led.

It was a long hot trail to California. May Braymer, the daughter of the swing station keeper, might not want to pull out with him. Jim could not see himself going without her, but May was strict; the soul of honor. He could lie to her—tell her he was leaving government service—but she would find out in time. "I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't!" Jim said bitterly.

He went back to the tired gray and picked up the reins. For a second his hand touched the butt of his carbine and then dropped to his issue Colt. How could he explain to May the fact that he was riding an issue horse and toting an issue pistol and that he had been paid off? She would never believe he had left government service after six years.

"You're army, Jim," she had once said. "Scouting is in your blood. I don't want to burn out my life at some dry desert post, saving each hard-earned penny, getting by on nothing, with you out on patrol taking your life in your hands twenty-four hours a day. No! I'll not marry you until you take up another kind of life."

Jim led the big gray forward. His head turned constantly, eying each patch of shadow, each clump of rock, waiting for the thick-maned red hellions to rise up and close in on him. It was a miracle of caution that he had reached this far without trouble, for the deserts and mountains were alive with the warriors of Coletto Amarillo; Tontos, Chiricahuas, Mimbrenos, Pinalenos and Yavapais who forgot tribal differences and rode behind the brilliant leadership of Yellow Tail.

He rode horses to death, harried stage routes, mines and ranches until the country was almost deserted by the Whites. Yellow Tail! The name made even the veteran Jim sweat coldly beneath his buckskins.

Jim had fought Geronimo, Soldado Fiero, Victorio and even the great Mangus Colorado, but Yellow Tail was a devil straight out of hell!

JIM followed the shadowy stage road, carbine at half-cock. Suddenly the thick adobes of the swing station appeared, set back from the road on a rocky flat encircled by the huge wall of the canyon itself. Jim led the gray into a clump of scrub oak and studied the lonely station. There was no sign of life. The walls of the corral were too

high for him to see if there were any horses in it.

Maybe Ed Braymer had fallen prey to the fear that swept the territory. There had been no coach on the road for ten days. Ed had only a handful of hostlers, Mexicans and American drifters who would not be the best defense against an Apache attack. But Ed was tough. It would take a lot to make him desert his post at Deep Canyon.

Jim looked back up the trail. If Cluskey had not been so damned irritating, the fight would never have happened. But he had scorned Jim's suggestion that they double the guards on the corral at Devoe which was crammed with half a hundred remounts.

Jim had argued back. Yellow Tail would not rest until he had his hands on those remounts, for horses were currency amongst the Apaches. They were transportation, food and a means of barter. But Cluskey had laughed at Jim. The laugh had set off the fight. The fight had done for Cluskey and made Jim a fugitive from army justice. Things had a way of happening swiftly on the frontier.

A sliver of light showed beneath the thick, bolt-studded door of the main building. Jim padded forward after dropping the gray's reins. He placed his carbine against the adobe wall and stood for a long time with his ear against the door listening. He grinned. Someone was playing *Billy Venero* on the harmonica.

He tapped on the door and stepped backward. The sliver of light winked out. Feet scuffled on the hard-packed floor and the music stopped. Metal clashed against metal. Then silence. Jim tapped again.

"Who is it?" The voice was muffled by the thick door.

"Jim Tate, Ed. Come in from Fort Devoe."

Silence again and then the clash of chains as the door was unbolted. The odor of a recently snuffed candle, mingled with that of sweat-soaked wool, baked beans and strong tobacco, drifted to Jim as the door creaked open a fraction. The double barrels of a shotgun poked out. "Step out into the open," a voice said.

Jim stepped out from the wall into the wash of moonlight.

"It's him all right," said Ed over his shoulder, "Where's your cayuse, Jim?"

"In the brush, Ed. I'll get him."

"Watch your step, Jim. One of my hostlers got it through the shoulder not fifty feet from the station a week ago."

Jim led the gray around to the front of the station. The huge double doors of the corral swung open. Enrique, one of the hostlers, peered out. "For the love of heaven, Señor Tate! Are you a ghost? *Los Indios* let no one live in this country these days."

"I'm alive, Enrique. Don't ask me how."

ENRIQUE hastily closed and barred the doors. He led the gray to the stables at the back of the corral. Jim pushed open the door of the big common room. For a moment he blinked in the light from three candle lanterns. The guttering yellow light alternately plunged parts of the room into deep shadow and then filled them with light.

A man leaned against the zinc-topped bar and stared at Jim. Another man lay sprawled across a sloppy table, his matted hair lying in liquor slops. Ed Braymer waved a hand at Jim. He reached for a square bottle. "I think you need this, Jim."

Jim nodded and took the proffered glass. He tossed it down and leaned his Winchester against the wall. Ed looked at him queerly. "You off the post alone?"

"Yes."

"Come all the way in tonight?"

Jim nodded.

"He's crazy or a liar," said the man at the bar. Jim lowered his head and looked at him. He was tall and well built. A flannel shirt was open halfway to his belt. Wool trousers, foxed with

buckskin, were thrust into low-heeled boots. The lamplight glittered from the ivory handles of two low-slung revolvers. Hard gray eyes held Jim's steadily.

"Anyone ask your opinion?" asked Jim.

The man grinned. Ed Braymer jerked a thumb at him. "Yancy Darrow," he said, "from down Galeyville way. This is Jim Tate, Yancy. Been sparkin' May for a year now."

"Do tell?" said Yancy. He wiped a hand across his mouth and looked at Jim speculatively. "Never figured an army scout could pass alone through the canyons to here from Devoe. Generally takes a troop or two behind them to do the job."

"Shut up!" barked Ed. He crossed the room to Jim and took hold of his right elbow. He led Jim to a far corner of the room. "Now! Just what the hell *are* you doing here, Jim?"

Jim took the plunge. "Got paid off. Couldn't wait to tell May. I want to pull out for California quick, Ed."

Ed shook his head. "No daughter of mine is going across this territory until Yellow Tail is run to earth!"

Jim spat to one side. "If she agrees to go I'm takin' her!"

Ed stepped back and placed his hands on his hips. "You heard me, Jim. Why, the territory is under a siege. How the hell you got through alone is beyond me, but you'll wait here for May until it's quiet or you'll go on alone!"

The door of May's room swung open. May Braymer looked across at them. Jim swallowed. Gawd, she was something to see! he thought. Her simple gingham dress clung to her full body. Her brown hair was highlighted by the yellow glow of the lanterns. She crossed the room swiftly, followed by the eyes of Yancy Darrow. She caught Jim's hands. "Jim! You shouldn't have come!"

"I've finished my contract with the government." *God forgive the lie.* "I want to leave as quickly as possible for Tucson, but your father doesn't think it's wise."

She looked at her father. He shook his head. She turned to Jim. "Perhaps we *should* wait, Jim."

"We can get married in Tucson and get a stage west out of there. They're not raiding west of the Old Pueblo."

"And Tucson only seventy-five miles away," Yancy put in drily, looking at the ceiling.

For a moment Jim struggled with his temper. Sweat of fear ran down his sides. He had known fear of the Apaches; any man who said he wasn't afraid of them was a damned liar. But this was different. The army made short work of any man who killed another in uniform.

"I'm not going," said May softly. Her eyes searched his face. "What's bothering you, Jim?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," he answered quickly. "Seems to me you'd follow the man you intend to marry if he asked you to."

"It isn't that, Jim." Her voice was desperate. "Dad would worry. I can't leave him here thinking of us being in the hands of Apaches. It isn't right."

Jim shrugged. "All right, then. I'll go on alone. But I'll give you until tomorrow night to think it over."

May squeezed his hands and turned quickly. She hurried from the room.

CHAPTER II

A New Enemy

JIM walked to the bar and poured a drink. Yancy leaned on one elbow and looked at him. "You sure are in a hell of a hurry to get yourself killed, Tate."

Jim's right hand closed tightly on the bottle. "Seems to me you're taking an almighty interest in my business, Darrow."

The big man grinned. "Hell, no! I'm just a curious man."

"Why are you so curious about *my* business?"

Yancy shrugged. "A government scout rides through a canyon filled with Apaches waitin' to lift someone's hair. Claims he's out of government service but still carries an issue weapon in his hip holster."

Jim's right hand dropped instinctively to his Colt. "How do you know this is issue?"

Yancy grinned annoyingly. "I didn't until you just gave yourself away."

"I'm warning you, Darrow. Keep your nose clean of my affairs."

Yancy yawned. "I'd still like to know why a government scout is willin' to take a woman seventy-five miles across an Apache-haunted desert with a hundred to one shot against makin' it. Looks peculiar, Tate."

Jim slowly drew the Colt and cocked it. He placed it on the bar and turned to look squarely at his baiter. "You fight as good as you talk, Darrow?"

Ed Braymer crossed the room swiftly. "Yancy, get outside and relieve Bartolome as guard."

Yancy flicked the butts of his twin Colts with his fingertips and lounged past them to the door.

Jim looked after the big man. "Just who is he?" he asked without turning to face Ed.

Ed reached for the bottle. "Scout, trapper, guide, teamster . . . anything and everything. A dangerous man, Jim."

Jim spat. "Pushes a little, doesn't he?"

"Sure. Sure. So do you. So do I."

Jim turned. "How long has he been here?"

"Couple of hours."

"Which way did he come in?"

"Same way you did. Cut through Juniper Canyon after dark though."

Jim whistled. His respect for Yancy Darrow climbed a notch. "That his story?"

"Listen, Jim. When Darrow says he came through Juniper I don't argue."

"Juniper is full of Apaches, Ed. Seems odd."

Jim filled his glass. A disquieting thought stole into his mind. The entrance to Juniper Canyon forked a few miles from Fort Devoe. To get through Juniper, a short cut to the swing station, Darrow would have had to pass the fort. Captain Folger had mounted pickets out all about the fort. In all likelihood they would have stopped Darrow. Maybe he had heard about Cluskey. Darrow would bear watching.

"Mind if I join you in a sociable drink?" a voice cut in on his thoughts.

It was the drunk from the table. He looked sideways at Jim as he reached for the bottle. "Greetings, Mr. Tate."

For a moment the bloated features were not recognizable. Then the mists of time cleared. "Mister Laroe," Jim said softly.

The drunk nodded and drank deeply. "Just Sam Laroe now, Jim.. Or 'Bottles' Laroe, if you prefer."

JIM looked away in disgust. Samuel Laroe had been a first lieutenant at Fort Devoe three years before. A good soldier but a heavy drinker. Too many drinks had caused him to lead his patrol into a trap laid by Yellow Tail in the days when the Apache was earning his spurs as a raider. Sam Laroe had gotten through but had left five dead troopers on the field and three wounded ones in the hands of the Apaches. Jim had been with the burial detail. The three men who had been left in Yellow Tail's hands were unrecognizable. Fire and knife had done hideous work before the last spark in their mutilated bodies had been snuffed out.

Laroe lifted the bottle and gauged its contents against the light. "You remember me now?" he asked softly.

Jim nodded.

Laroe wiped a shaking hand across his mouth. "So now I work for Ed Braymer. A fair life, Tate. A place to sleep.

Plenty of food and liquor. No memories."

Laroe turned from the bar and took the bottle to his table. "No memories," he repeated as he sat down.

Jim turned back to Ed. "We were talking about Darrow," he prompted the station keeper.

"Yancy likes May, Jim. Comes here once in a while. At night. Seems shy of the law and of the army. As far as I know he has a little spread near the Border somewhere. Word gets around, Jim. Cattlemen claim he's not against picking up a stray steer or two to build up his herd. He'll be a respectable man some day in Arizona . . . once he's built up his ranch and no questions asked."

"If he lives."

Ed looked closely at Jim. "Come clean, Jim. What happened at Fort Devoe?"

Jim studied the liquor in his glass and then finally admitted the story of his run-in with Cluskey and the unforeseen conclusion of the argument.

Braymer whistled. He glanced at his daughter's door. Somewhere in the depths of the big building a clock chimed midnight. Ed looked at Jim. "Well?"

Jim placed his right hand near his Colt. "I don't intend to get caught, Ed. They'd never believe me."

"You figured on getting May and heading west before they caught up with you?"

"That's the size of it."

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Ed ran thick fingers through his shock of gray hair. "I ought to buffalo you for thinking of taking her away under those conditions. But I've got no sympathy for Cluskey. Always was a loud-mouth with a tongue like a firethorn. You'll not take May from here, Jim. It's not so much the Apaches I'm thinkin' of but of the life you'd lead once she found out the truth. She'd be loyalty itself but there would be no love there and you'd be shackled together for life, hating each other. She'd never leave you; nor would she forgive you."

"I was a fool to come here."

"You didn't think," said Ed gently. "Get some sleep. I'll let you know if they come after you."

"How about the others?"

"May doesn't know . . . yet. Laroe doesn't care. Yancy is the problem but I doubt if *he'll* talk. My hostlers will keep their mouths shut if I tell them to. I'll hide your gray in the cleft behind the corral. If a patrol comes, lay low."

HOURS later Jim was still awake. He could see nothing ahead of him. Nothing but empty years, hiding from the army, without May and without hope. Finally he dropped off into a fitful sleep.

The clash of hoofs on the hard earth of the station enclosure waked him at dawn. He hit the floor and dragged his Colt free. He cocked it and backed up against the wall next to the window, pushing the drab curtain aside a trifle. His throat went dry. A dozen troopers were watering their mounts at the trough. They were tired and alkali dust masked their faces. A tall officer was talking to Ed Braymer. It was Lieutenant Heston.

"Ain't seen Jim Tate for two weeks, Mister Heston," said Ed easily.

Heston nodded. His gray eyes looked about the corral and at the stables. "Yes. It isn't likely he'd come here. It would be the first place we'd think of looking."

"Why are you so anxious to find him?"

Heston pulled on his gauntlets. "You'll hear about it when the time comes. I've got to get on toward Tucson. Thanks for the water, Braymer."

The patrol rode out of the station enclosure. The beat of the hoofs died away to the west. Jim slid his Colt into its holster and went into the common room. Laroe still was at his table, sprawled back in his chair staring at the empty bottle in front of him. Ed Braymer came in. "Well?" he said, "You heard?"

"He'll ride all the way to Yuma looking for me," said Jim slowly.

Ed shrugged. "It's a big country."

Enrique hurried into the room. "Señor Braymer! Come quickly!"

They followed the hostler to the corral. Enrique pointed up the flank of the mountain. Yancy Darrow was standing on a shoulder of rock. As he saw them he pointed with his carbine to the northeast. A thread of smoke was rising from a distant peak which was tinted rose and gold with the morning sun. It broke into a puff followed by two more. Farther to the north another peak erupted a series of puffs. The wind was already ravelling smoke puffs from still another peak.

"The Apaches are gathering," said Jim thoughtfully. "Something big is going to happen."

"Maybe they are planning to follow Heston's patrol?" Braymer jerked a thumb to the west.

"I doubt it. It looks like bigger game."

Darrow was scrambling down the mountainside. He came around the station into the corral. "I've been up there since before dawn. Saw the signals with the first light. A big party of armed men are riding to the northeast."

Jim scratched his chin. "Could only be from one place. Fort Devoe."

Yancy nodded.

"Heston mentioned something about a scout coming in last evening with a report that Yellow Tail had been seen following the trail toward Medicine Springs," said Braymer uneasily.

CHAPTER III

A Vulnerable Fort

JIM got up on a feedbin which was against the corral wall and rested his elbows on the thick adobe. The broncos were gathering not far from the fort. But why? They wouldn't buck up against Devoe with the better part of a troop there. There were no stagecoaches running. Freight and supply trains had holed up waiting for Yellow Tail to quiet down.

Darrow got up on the box. "Looks queer, doesn't it?"

Jim nodded.

"I'm willing to bet Folger is riding northeast after what *he* thinks is Yellow Tail."

"So?"

Yancy grinned. "Who else could it be? Yellow Tail probably isn't near Medicine Springs at all. I'll bet my harmonica against that gray of yours that Yellow Tail is sitting right now watching Fort Devoe."

"Seems to me you're making a long bet."

Yancy shook his head. He looked at Jim queerly. "I saw him in Juniper Canyon last night. He'd need a flying carpet if he was near Medicine Springs at almost the same time! He had fifty warriors with him, armed with Winchesters and Spencers. Besides, I saw stone and twig piles. Messages to his warriors telling them to gather at Juniper."

"The horses!" Jim exclaimed. "With Folger gone with a good part of the troop and Heston riding west with a dozen more that would leave Devoe garrisoned by not more than twenty troopers with the women and kids at the post to be guarded."

"Yellow Tail would sell his soul to get

his bloody hands on those remounts in the corral. Besides that, he might take a crack at the post itself. You've seen how he works. He could do it."

"The only officer left at the post, if Folger has gone, would be Mister Callen. He's a shavetail fresh out of West Point."

"You're lucky you got out in time, Tate."

"Yeh," said Jim slowly. "Yeh." He stared at the eastern mountains whose peaks were just visible through the wide canyon. The warehouse at Fort Devoe was filled with supplies. The magazine was crammed with thousands of rounds of ammunition. It would be a big haul for Yellow Tail.

"Jim! Jim!" It was May. He helped her up onto the feedbin. Yancy stepped down and sauntered off. "What do the signals mean?" she asked anxiously.

"Yellow Tail is gathering his men near Fort Devoe."

She held a slim hand above her eyes and studied the smoke signals. "Why, Jim?"

"Yancy and I agree that most of the garrison is off on a wild goose chase. Yellow Tail might be getting ready to jump the post, run off the horses and perhaps raid the post itself."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"What *can* I do?" he asked bitterly. "I'm through with government service. I'm riding on to Tucson tonight and nothing will stop me."

She looked at him queerly. "You've changed somehow. You're not the man I fell in love with."

He looked at the eastern peaks now rising harsh and bright above the morning haze. "I'm through, May. I'll be back for you some day."

She stepped down from the box and looked up at him. The breeze swept her skirts, outlining her long shapely legs. "Don't bother," she said, "If *I* were a man I'd do something about those people at Fort Devoe. Something! Anything!" She spun on a heel and ran into the station.

A HARMONICA began to play softly. For a moment the strains escaped Jim and then it became clear. He walked toward the stable. *La Raza de Bronce Que Sabe Morir.* He said aloud, "The bronze race that knows how to die!"

Darrow was sitting on a tilted box with his back against the stable wall playing the harmonica. His eyes followed Jim. Jim squatted not far from Yancy and picked up some pebbles. He tossed them idly into the air and caught them in his hand. Yancy played on. The old Mexican air seemed to occupy all his thoughts.

The Bronze Race That Knows How to Die! The grudging admiration of the Mexicans for the fierce warriors of the Southwest, the Yaquis, Apaches, Opatas and Tarahumares. Yancy stopped playing and tapped his harmonica against the side of his boot. "What's on your mind, Tate?"

Jim tossed the pebbles. "Seems to me you know a helluva lot about the Apaches, Darrow."

"Well?"

"You come through Juniper Canyon when it's full of them. You understand their smoke signals. You play a song dedicated to their courage."

Yancy's eyes narrowed. "What are you leadin' up to?"

Jim looked up at him. "Why were you off the station this morning when the troopers came through?"

"Sometimes men die for askin' questions like that."

Jim shrugged. "You were asking the questions last night, Darrow."

"I didn't see *you* rushin' out to greet Heston."

Jim shook his head. He stood up. "I'm just warning you that I don't like the way you've been minding my business. There's something damned odd about you. Something that escapes my mind at the time."

Darrow dropped his right hand toward his pistol butt. Jim took two steps forward. His right foot crashed against the tilted box. As it went from under

Darrow he struggled for balance, then he went over sideways clawing at his Colt. Jim reached down and gripped Darrow's wrist and grabbed a tight handful of Darrow's collar. He dragged the big man up and slammed his head back hard against the adobe of the stable. Darrow gagged and gripped Jim's right hand with his.

"Now, amigo," said Jim quietly, "listen well. I don't like you. You've riled me too damned much since I came in here last night. Keep your nose out of my business. And another thing! Keep away from May!" Jim released his grip and jumped back. He whipped out his Colt and cocked it, smashing the muzzle into Darrow's belly before Darrow could draw. "That clear?"

Hate filled Yancy's eyes. "I'm going to kill you for this, Tate."

Jim raised his Colt and let the hammer down. He slid it into its holster. "Go ahead and draw, Darrow."

For a long moment they stared at each other, Jim waiting for the telltale flick of the eyes that would be the signal for Yancy's draw. But it never came. Darrow slowly raised a hand and rubbed his throat. Then he walked swiftly away. Jim grinned. He watched the big man stride into the station. Then he walked slowly after Darrow whistling dolefully *The Bronze Race That Knows How To Die.*

LATE that afternoon Jim sat uncomfortably in the common room watching Laroe pace back and forth. Yancy sat in a far corner playing solitaire. Braymer stood by the open door looking to the east. There was a tension about the station. Nothing had been said for an hour. The door of May's room opened. She came into the room and went to Yancy's table. "Yancy," she said, "will you try to reach Fort Devoe?"

Yancy carefully placed a card. "Maybe."

All eyes were on May. "If you do," she said, "I'll be waiting here for you."

Yancy looked at Jim. Jim got up and walked across the room. "I'll take a hand in this," he said. Braymer closed the door and turned to look at him. Laroe stopped his pacing. "I'll go," Jim said.

Yancy got up and swept the cards together, tightened his gun belt and settled it about his lean hips. He looked at Jim. "Come on then," he said quietly. He walked swiftly out of the door that led to the corral.

May smiled at Jim and touched his arm. "I knew you'd go."

Laroe picked up a carbine from the corner and put his hat on his head. Braymer came across the room to him. "Sam! You'd better stay here."

Laroe shook his head. "I'm going. I can still shoot and ride. They may need me."

"But Sam. . . ."

Laroe thrust out his chin. "Damn you! I know what you're thinking. Get out of my way." He pushed Ed aside and left the room. Braymer shrugged and looked at Jim.

"Let him go," said Jim. "You've got enough men to hold this place?"

"Six hostlers and myself. May can shoot as good as any man." He grinned. "Go on, Jim. It's a good thing you're doing."

Jim spat and picked up his Winchester. He hurried out to the corral. Enrique had already saddled the gray. Jim thrust the Winchester into its boot and hung a full canteen from the saddle. Yancy was saddling a rangy dun and Laroe was leading out a roan. Yancy looked at Jim. He glanced at Laroe. "Is 'Bottles' planning to ride with us, amigo?"

Jim nodded.

"You want him to?"

"He can shoot. We may need him."

"Not the way I'm figgerin' on goin'."

Jim checked the gray's cinch. "You running the show, Darrow?"

Yancy shook his head. "I'm cuttin' through Juniper Canyon, Tate."

Jim whistled. "You play rough."

"If you go through Deep Canyon you'll probably find Yellow Tail has an ambush waitin' there for Heston to return. By goin' through Juniper we may have a better chance. Yellow Tail would never figure on anyone stickin' their necks in there. If we ride now we can reach there after dark and work our way through without the horses."

Jim looked up at him. Darrow's eyes were inscrutable but it was obvious he meant what he had said. There was something sticking in the back of Jim's mind about the man. Something he should know but something that was as elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp.

Jim swung up on the gray. May came close by his side. "Thanks, Jim."

For a long moment he looked down on her. "I'm going because I don't want that hombre thinking I haven't got the guts." He touched the gray with his spurs and kneed it away from her. He did not look back as he guided the horse through the open corral gates. He heard the clatter of hoofs as Laroe and Yancy rode after him.

CHAPTER IV

The Life-or-Death Climb

HOURS later they halted in a deep slot of a canyon that was not far from the mouth of Juniper Canyon. Jim slid from the saddle and waited for the others. Yancy kneed his dun close to Jim. "There's water farther in," he said. "We can picket the horses there. From here on in we walk."

Yancy dismounted and led his horse into the darkness of the canyon. Laroe stumbled a little as he swung down from his horse. Jim shook his head. The ex-officer was as clumsy as a cub bear.

Yancy led the way around a bend in the canyon and silently pointed out a pool of water close under an overhanging wall. He picketed his dun and waited for the others to do likewise. Then he motioned the two closer to him. "We can work our way into the mouth of Juniper and then up the side of the canyon. There is a trail along the side. Not much of a footpath but better than poking our way through the brush at the bottom with Yellow Tail's boys listening to every sound."

"Lead on," said Laroe with a nervous laugh.

Jim looked closely at the drunkard. Yancy pulled his Spencer carbine free from its boot and slung his canteen from his belt. He set off in the darkness toward the mouth of the canyon.

The night was pitch dark. The moon had not shown itself as yet. Yancy skirted a rugged shoulder of rock and then stopped. He pointed with his carbine. "Juniper," he said softly. Before them was a yawning gap of inky shadow.

Yancy turned to the right and began to climb up a talus slope, placing each foot carefully. Laroe stumbled now and then causing a slight clatter. Jim cursed beneath his breath. Yancy went on higher and higher, until they were forced to pull themselves up over clumps of rock and sidle along narrow ledges. Laroe's breathing was coming hard and he fell behind them.

At last, Yancy passed his carbine up above his head to a ledge and then found foot and handholds to pull himself up. Jim passed up his Winchester and Yancy gave him a hand. Yancy looked over the edge. "He sounds beat out," he said.

Jim nodded. "We better send him back."

Yancy shook his head. He turned slowly to look at Jim. "He has honor buried beneath that drunken front. We couldn't leave him there while we went on. He would not want to be . . . *dasoda-hae.*"

Again the elusive thought came to Jim. *Dasoda-hae.* Apache for he-that-

is-just-sitting-there. "You speak Apache?"

Yancy shrugged. "Well enough. Here he is."

A moment later Laroe struggled up beside them. His breathing came in gulps and he held his head in his hands. Yancy pointed along the ledge. "The trail begins up there. It's rough, a narrow shelf of rock. A mile from here it passes around a bald shoulder of rock. If the moon comes out before we get there it will be almost impossible to pass there without being seen."

"Then we better . . . get on . . . the way," said Laroe. Yancy nodded and padded off along the ledge.

THE way grew progressively worse. Decomposed rock formed loose footing. Fallen boulders blocked the way forcing them to work their way carefully with inches of foot space beneath them. Sharp rock tore at their clothing and flesh but still Yancy went on. Jim gave him grudging admiration for having the guts to lead the way on such a trail in the dark.

Then Yancy stopped. He waited for Jim and Laroe. Silently he pointed down into the darkness far below them. A pinpoint of light showed on the floor of the canyon. He pointed farther ahead. Another pinpoint of light showed against the dark. "Apache fires," said Yancy. "They're damned sure of themselves in here. The trail reaches the bad spot two hundred yards from here. You still game?"

"Get on with it," said Laroe.

Yancy pulled a length of rawhide cord from his shirt front. "Cut slings for your carbines," he said. "You'll need hands and feet, toenails and teeth to hang on from here."

Yancy led on again. It was still dark. Suddenly the trail curved. High above them was a naked expanse of sheer rock. Below them the wall plunged sheer to the canyon floor. Yancy began to work his way out on the ledge. Jim gripped Laroe's shoulder and motioned him on. The ex-officer nodded and worked his way out. Jim followed Laroe.

Time and time again Jim clung to the wall by finger and toe holds, straining his body hard against the unyielding rock. Sweat trickled down his body, soaking his buckskins. Now and then he heard a faint sound as Laroe worked his way along.

Then they were far out on the huge curving face of rock, in clear view if there had been light. One stone kicked over the edge and the Apaches would be alert. One clink of gun barrel against rock and the keenest ears in the world would detect them.

A hand touched Jim's. It was Laroe. He had worked himself into a narrow crevice and his breathing came in gasps. "I can't go on, Jim. I'm beat."

Jim cursed beneath his breath. "You can't stay here."

"Leave me."

"Damn it! No! You're not licked."

"What the hell is this?" It was Yancy. "Fine time to hold a sociable. Come on! The moon is rising."

Jim jerked his head at Laroe. "He's foundered."

Yancy leaned close to the ex-officer. "You want to sit up here? They'll pick you out like a snail out of his shell!"

"Go on!" said Laroe weakly. "Forget about me."

Yancy cursed. "To hell with you! If they spot you they'll be on the alert for me and Tate."

Jim worked his way past the crevice. He motioned Yancy on. He leaned close to the big man's ear. "Take it easy," he said, "he'll come on."

A faint wash of light began to show against the eastern sky. Yancy jerked his head. "See that?"

"We can't leave him here."

The upper peaks were touched with the light. The canyon seemed to shroud itself in deeper shadow by contrast. "He's *ilge-nad-in* . . . trash," said Yancy. His teeth showed white against his face as he sneered. Then it came to Jim. A

ball of ice formed in his stomach. He had seen that face before, sneering in just such a way. A face among Apache faces. A white renegade that had ridden with Soldado Fiero in his heyday. "Porico!" Jim almost yelled. "White Horse!"

Yancy grinned. "So you know me now?"

Jim tried to lower a hand to his knife but he could not let go his holds. The renegade had trapped them. They would never get off the ledge alive. "Damn you!" Jim said between his teeth.

Yancy shook his head. "I have not ridden with them for years. Yellow Tail hates me and would like nothing better than to get his hands on me."

Yancy edged closer. "I want May Braymer, but she knows nothing of my past. Now you know why I hid from the soldiers. Now you know how I learned the high trails. But I'm White now, Tate."

Jim spat. "Your word is nothing!"

Yancy grinned. "What can you do now? I'll let you sweat out this trip, hombre, wonderin' whether or not I'll turn you in. It's a good joke. It'll pay for that little show you put on in the corral. Come on if you've got the guts!"

Laroe edged out beside Jim. "Go on," he said. "I'll keep up just to show that scum I can do it."

YANCY was already far along the ledge. Jim followed him, moving slowly, testing each hold and never looking down. The sky was lighter.

Yancy edged along the ledge. Beneath his feet was a narrow strip of rock, cracked and seamed. He crossed it gingerly, glanced back at Jim and then hopped across a gap. He clung for a moment to a spur of rock, and then swung himself out of sight. Jim felt for toe holds and edged out. The gap yawned beneath his feet. He rested a moment and then leaped. His left hand gashed itself on the spur of rock. Blood flowed into his palm as he hung there holding his entire weight by the one hand. He tried to reach the spur with his right hand but it was impossible. He gritted his teeth.

"Let go. I'll grab you." It was Yancy from the darkness beyond the spur. Jim looked back over his shoulder. It was a long way down. He had to trust Yancy now. "Ready?" he asked.

"Now," said Yancy.

Jim let go. For a fraction of a second his left hand fanned the air desperately and then steely fingers closed on his wrist and drew him forward. Jim gripped the spur with his right hand and eased himself close to Yancy. "Is the drunk comin' on?" asked Yancy with a grin.

Jim leaned out. Laroe was a blur against the cliff face. The ex-officer hesitated and then leaped, gripped the spur and swung himself beside Jim. For a moment he swayed uncertainly and then Jim gripped him. "For the love of God," breathed Laroe, "I still don't believe I made it." Jim clapped him on the shoulder and pointed at the moon. The cliff face was beginning to light up near the top.

Jim followed the ledge by feel in the shadows. Yancy was crouched behind a boulder in an open area. He held up a hand for silence. Laroe stumbled and his feet clattered on the loose rock. Yancy crouched low. He motioned them down.

Jim drew his knife. Something was moving cautiously up the ridge toward them. A man stood up and stared in their direction. Apache! For long moments the warrior stood still as though testing the night with every sense in his body and then he padded silently forward. He stopped just beyond Yancy and bent forward to peer into the darkness.

Suddenly Yancy stood up. One big hand gripped the warrior's throat. The other hit hard. The Apache sprawled across the rock. Jim moved in fast as the warrior whipped out a knife and slashed up at Yancy. Jim's blade flashed down, striking through flesh, grating off

bone and sinking deep. The Apache coughed and then lay still but Yancy's grip never relaxed.

Finally Yancy eased the body down. The moonlight filtered in on them. Yancy ran a hand along the inside of his right thigh and held the hand up. It was red with blood. He grinned at Jim. "Close. Thanks."

Jim nodded. "Let's get on. They might look for him."

Yancy unslung his carbine, vaulted the boulder and moved swiftly down the ridge. Jim motioned Laroe on.

CHAPTER V

One Man Gone

DAWN was tinting the eastern sky when the three stopped for a breather high on a ridge overlooking the dry watercourse that led past Fort Devoe. Laroe was in bad shape. Time and time again he had fallen far behind only to catch up again by a terrific effort. Yancy never relented in his swift, ground-eating pace. Even Jim, hardened as he was, found it hard work to keep up with the big man.

"Now what?" asked Yancy easily.

Jim shrugged. "Scout the fort. See what's doing."

"Fair enough," agreed Yancy. He looked at Laroe, a pathetic, beaten figure beside Jim. "Can you keep up, *Mister* Laroe?"

Laroe nodded. "Go on," he said, "I'll be in at the payoff."

They went down the ridge and followed the course of the dry river, keeping in the cover of scrub trees and brush. Laroe was far behind as they topped a rise which overlooked Fort Devoe.

The adobes and *jacales* of the fort stood out clearly in the dawn light. The corral was crammed with horses. Yancy jerked a thumb at the fort. "Look peaceful enough."

Jim nodded. He turned to look at Laroe. The drunk was running clumsily, pointing behind him. Jim looked up the ridge far behind them. A line of horsemen were picking their way down the ridge. There were at least fifty of them. "Here are your old friends," said Jim drily, "coming to the shindig."

They dropped into the bed of the dry river and began to run swiftly. It was no place to make a stand. Laroe stumbled along behind them. Yancy stopped in a thicket. He turned to Jim. "That louse will queer the game," he said.

"Shut up," said Jim.

Laroe neared them. He pointed ahead. "There's a place near the corral where you can hole up," he said. "Clear field of fire covering the corral. Good riflemen can make it hot for horsethieves from there. Go on!"

Jim ran a few steps back. "What's wrong, Sam?"

Laroe stopped and leaned on his carbine. He smiled wanly. "Beat out. Running on nerve. Go on. I'll keep Yellow Tail busy for awhile."

"Come on," said Yancy." Let him be a hero. He'd never keep up."

Jim started back but Laroe had climbed out of the river bed and disappeared into the brush. Jim spun on a heel and ran despite his fatigue. Apaches! The word was enough to spark the most reluctant feet into swift action.

Yancy looked about and then pointed with his carbine up a slope. There was a nest of rocks there. He ran up the slope, dodging low and taking advantage of every scrap of cover. He dived in among the rocks.

Jim followed him and looked over the far side. The rear wall of the corral was about two hundred and fifty yards away and beyond that the fort slumbered in the early morning sun.

"Look!" said Yancy.

Jim turned. The Apaches had spread out into a crescent. Facing them was a

lone figure with carbine ready. It was Laroe. The Apaches began to gallop. Laroe raised his carbine. The faint report just carried to the nest of rocks. A buck slid from his paint pony. Laroe swung his carbine. It cracked again. A horse went down.

The Apaches hung on the far side of their ponies and raced about the lone rifleman. An arrow flashed in the bright light. Laroe staggered as it plunged into his left shoulder. He dropped his carbine and dragged at his revolver. A warrior drove in hard, lance flashing through the air. Laroe went down. He sprawled flat with the lance standing high above his body. In a moment there was a flurry of horsemen about the prone figure. Jim looked away.

Yancy spat. "Died game anyway. They didn't spot us."

THERE was no sign of life at the fort other than a sentry pacing near the flagpole. He had not heard the shooting. Jim cursed.

Yancy touched Jim's shoulder and pointed down the slope. The Apaches were coming down the dry river bed on foot. Another group had fanned out and scattered through the brush facing one side of the fort. "Shooting for the whole works," said Yancy.

Jim cocked his Winchester and drew out his Colt. He placed it and a handful of cartridges on a flat rock. He drew his hat low over his eyes and eased the Winchester forward. Yancy slid his Spencer forward.

The Apaches in the river bed padded silently forward, the early sun glinting from the brass trim of their weapons. Four of them ran out ahead carrying riatas and water skins.

"Use the water to soften the wall and the riata to saw out a gate to drive out the horses," Yancy told Jim. "What the hell is goin' on in that fort?"

Jim shrugged. He sighted on the last figure running toward the corral. "Two hundred yards," he said out of the side of his mouth. "Last man."

"More likely two hundred and twenty yards. First man. Ready?"

Jim hesitated a second and then squeezed off. The flat crack of the Winchester was followed by the heavier report of the Spencer. Jim levered another cartridge into the chamber. His man had gone down sprawling, the split water skin he had been carrying making a wet mark upon the earth. Yancy's target was gripping his side and staring at the nest of rocks.

Yancy's next shot dropped one of the others. Jim swung his carbine and fired at a trio of bucks darting up the slope at them. One of them fell heavily. Another doubled up and thrashed out his life on the ground as Yancy fired again. "Sitting ducks!" yelled Yancy.

"Them or us?" Jim asked as he fired again.

The Apaches disappeared into the brush leaving their dead and wounded scattered on the ground. A bugle blared from the fort sending the echoes flying. Faint shouts came up to the two on the hill.

"Whaddaya know?" asked Yancy with a grin. "They're alive!"

Rifle flashes sparkled from the brush along the dry river. Slugs spattered on the rocks. Yancy cursed as the needle-like splinters drove into his face. He fired at a moccasined foot protruding from behind a rock and grinned as it was hastily withdrawn.

The firing stopped. The Apaches who had been working up on the fort had scattered into the brush. Yancy reloaded his Spencer. He stuck up his head. "*Ahi-ya-hai!* Girls! Frightened women! Are you afraid?" he jeered in Chiricahua.

A slug bounced off a rock and screamed eerily off into space. Rifles cracked all through the brush. Jim looked to their left. A mesquite bush had moved and there was no wind. He poured three shots into the brush. They were moving in. Down at the fort troopers were running toward the corral with carbines. There was only a

handful of them.

The shooting increased. Yancy fired until his carbine ran dry and grinned at Jim as he reloaded. "Last full load, amigo. How do you stand?"

"Twenty rounds."

"Make them count. Here comes a rush!"

FEET rattled on the gravel in a draw to the right of the rock nest. An arrow arched through the air and pinned Jim's left sleeve to the ground. He tore it free. A slug whipped through the slack of his buckskin jacket. He fired from the hip, levering a full magazine load through the hot carbine. A slug skinned his left shoulder. Another whipped his hat from his head. Yancy grunted as a bullet smacked into his left arm. He staggered back and dropped his Spencer.

An Apache darted from the draw. Jim's Winchester clicked emptily. He reversed it and caught the Apache flush on the side of the skull with a sound like that of a breaking melon.

Yancy drew a Colt and fired rapidly, the six shots sounding almost as one. The Apaches dived for cover leaving two warriors on the hard earth. Jim dropped the Winchester. He had snapped the stock. He drew his knife and held it in his left hand while he raised his Colt in his right.

A ripple of fire came from the corral. The troopers were firing at the Apaches running up the river bed. But a last desperate charge was forming against the rock nest. A squat warrior flourished a brass-bellied Henry rifle. He pointed up the hill. His mouth was a thin gash across his broad face.

Yancy pointed down the hill. "Coletto Amarillo," he said. "Yellow Tail is after us, amigo. We've spoiled his medicine he is saying. The *heshke* is upon him!"

The *heshke!* The wild killing craze! Nothing short of death would stop Yellow Tail. Jim cocked his Colt. Yancy reached across to his left holster. He drew his Colt and thumbed back the hammer. Suddenly he leaped atop the rocks. In an exaggerated gesture he turned his back on the approaching warriors and raised one leg. He slapped his haunch with the barrel of his Colt and laughed.

Yellow Tail shouted in rage. *"Ahai! Ya! Hiya! Yip! Pi!"* He darted up the hill. *"Ahai-ya-hiya-yip-pi!"* the bucks roared behind him.

Jim lowered his Colt. His first shot spun a buck about. The second shot ripped the life from a warrior close behind Yellow Tail. Yellow Tail raised his Henry rifle and fired. The slug hit the rocks behind Jim. The warriors fanned out and ran with their heads down as though they were facing a heavy wind.

Yellow Tail reached the rocks. Two warriors were behind him, the others either lying on the slope or running back to the brush.

Jim's Colt ran dry. Yancy dropped both warriors.

Yellow Tail leaped up on the rocks. Spittle drooled from his slit of a mouth. He swung the Henry rifle. Jim hurled his knife as the muzzle of the rifle settled on Yancy. The blade sank into Yellow Tail's chest. He coughed hard and doubled over. His rifle discharged into the earth. He dropped flat.

Yancy leaped across the rocks and dragged out his knife. He circled the heavy mane of hair and snatched the scalp free. He waved it in the air and cursed at the fleeing bucks in fluent Apache. "I have let his spirit out quick!" he shouted. "See his scalp? Run you dogs! Fish eaters! Carrion!" He laughed hysterically.

CHAPTER VI

Settling the Score

JIM sat down and held his head in his hands. The whole fight had not lasted twenty minutes but the fort was safe. Yellow Tail dead. The Apache spirit would be broken.

"Get up!"

Jim looked up. Yancy was swaying a little but the Colt in his hand was centered on Jim.

"Get up! We've a call to make at Fort Devoe."

Jim got up. "We'd better clear out of here, Yancy. We've finished our job."

Yancy grinned. "It's not done for me. Get down that hill. Don't try anything, Jim. I can shoot straight enough now to scupper you. Get!"

Jim walked down the hill. He was unarmed. Yancy's mind had cracked. Jim skirted the corral. Yancy would see to it that he would not return to claim May but Yancy himself seemed to have forgotten that he was wanted by the army for his renegade activities.

A row of heads appeared atop the corral walls. "Good work, men . . ." The voice trailed off. "It's Jim Tate!" The troopers vanished from the wall.

Jim walked across the parade ground followed by Yancy. Lieutenant Callen walked swiftly across to meet them. A cocked revolver was in his hand and two troopers were behind the officer, their watchful eyes never leaving Jim's face. "You've brought him in," said Callen. "There's a reward out for this man."

"He saved your horses and maybe your lives, Mister," said Yancy slowly.

Callen nodded.

"That will be taken into consideration at his trial."

Yancy slid his Colt into its holster and gripped his wounded arm. "Wait a minute! Tate fought in self defense. Cluskey drew on him. Tate fought for the gun. The trigger was pulled by Cluskey in the struggle."

Callen stared at Jim.

"Is this true?"

Jim turned to look at Yancy.

"Yes it's true. How did you know, Darrow?"

Yancy grinned. "I was watching the whole thing from the corral wall. I was hoping to run off a few government horses myself and then you interrupted me."

Callen held his Colt on Yancy. "You'll stay here to appear at a board of inquiry and also to answer charges of attempting to steal government property!"

"My! My!" said Yancy. "Listen to the soldier!"

"Wait a minute," said Jim. "Yancy Darrow led us through Juniper Canyon to get here in time to louse up Yellow Tail's raid. Yellow Tail is dead up on that hill. If Darrow hadn't led us here in time you might be dead now, Mister Callen. The horses would be gone and worse than that the women and children on this post might be in his hands!"

Callen lowered his Colt. "That's true! What should I do, Tate?"

"Remember what he told you about Cluskey's death. Dress his wound and let him get out of here."

One of the troopers stared keenly at Yancy. "Porico!" he exclaimed. "White Horse!"

"What does he mean?" asked Callen. of Jim.

Jim looked at the trooper.

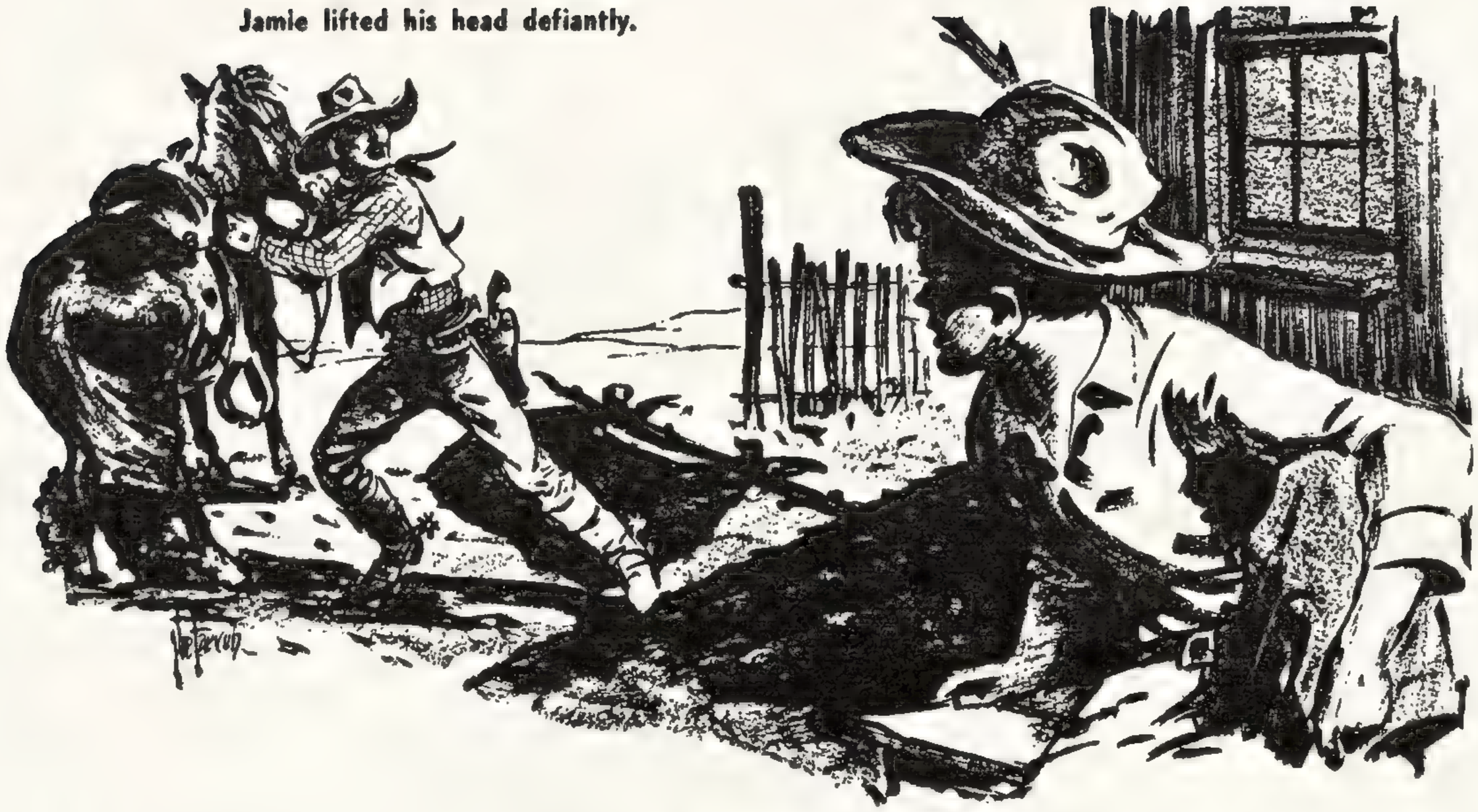
"Nothing! Nothing at all! That right, trooper?"

The trooper looked up at the hill littered with dead raiders and nodded. "Nothing at all, Mister Callen."

LATER Jim gave Yancy a boost up into the saddle of an issue horse. He looked up questioningly at the grinning ex-renegade. "Well?" he asked, "Why did you do it?"

Yancy shrugged. "May can easily forget you killed in self-defense, Jim. She would never accept a reformed renegade." He looked to the west where the Grindstones rose harsh against the bright sky. "*Dih asd-za hig-e balgon-ya-hi dont-e shilg-nli dah!*" He kneed his horse away from Jim and waved his good arm.

Jim watched the big man until he was out of sight. Yancy had said, "This I have done and what has resulted therefrom is all the same to me!" Jim nodded. It was Yancy's way. ● ● ●



BACK TRAIL

By JAN KASER

Jamie Carter was too young to sling guns, but he figured there must be another way to protect his mother from this badman

BY STANDING on tiptoe, Jamie Carter could still see his father's erect back moving away into the green distance. But he could no longer distinguish one steer from another, for the line had fused until it resembled a fat snake. It would take them three days to reach the loading station with the herd.

"You're grown now, Jamie," his father had said from atop the blue roan, "so I can leave you in charge. Remember just this—if you've got to choose between the lesser of two evils, don't take either one. Good luck."

Jamie was twelve. He lingered on the mossy knoll behind the cabin, watching smoke from the chimney etch gray lines upon the empty slate of the dawn sky. He would not have to replenish the fire for several hours. His mother could sleep undisturbed. And Baby Jennifer was going to get well.

Jamie couldn't reckon exactly how long the baby's fever had lasted. The nights had been as endless as his mother's footsteps between the hearth and the little bed, while the days were hideous, with the fear lurking in her hollow eyes.

"No, Jeremy," she had said to his father, "only a mother knows how." As if she stood alone between Baby Jennifer and the two wooden crosses at the foot

of the oak tree.

All that was over now. And his father had been able to make the drive. Their first. Jamie straightened with pride. Everything was going to be fine.

A bluejay called from a hazelnut bush, "Get to work!"

Picking up the two empty pails, he followed the narrow footpath through the silver-trunked alders to the spring. On the way back, he caught the sound of shale rock grating against itself. He looked to the right, toward the main trail.

The stranger rode a pinto mare. Cautiously the small animal picked its way down, striving for equilibrium beneath the unfair burden. The smile on the man's face was twisted by a jagged scar between the left ear and jawbone.

They met on the knoll.

"Mind if I rest my horse, sonny?" asked the stranger.

BEFORE Jamie could answer, the man, with weasel swiftness, had dismounted. Abruptly the boy set down the pails.

"Nice spread you got here," said the stranger, his eyes narrowing over the cabin, the corral, and the cattle feeding beyond in knee-deep grass. "Your pa got any horses to sell?"

"My father's not here," Jamie replied simply. "But we've no more horses than we need."

"I see," said the stranger, pursing his lips. "Lot to do on a place like this. But I s'pose there's bigger tads'n you around to help."

"No, sir."

The stranger spat a speculative stream of yellow juice. Jamie recoiled. One brownish wad had fallen upon the crystal surface of the pail. Slowly it sank, leaving a thin spiral suspended in the water.

"Kind of an out of the way spot here, ain't it, sonny? Off the main run quite a piece."

Jamie felt an inexplicable desire to contradict the man. He might say that people took this turn pretty often. But he didn't.

"Folks stay mostly to the wagon road," he said.

At that moment, the cabin chimney belched forth a gray cloud. Pitch knot, Jamie remembered, and noted the stranger's intent gaze toward the clearing.

"Must get mighty lonesome here for a strapping young feller like you. Excitement's all in town. Bright pokebonnets to look at. Flashy baubles to admire. Like this one, for instance."

Jamie inhaled sharply. In the man's hand lay a small golden dog with a smidgin of tail, and glittering red eyes.

"Purty is as purty does," said the man, pressing down on the stub tail. Out of the dog's mouth shot a thin knife-blade.

Jamie was transfixed.

Chuckling, the man placed thumb and forefinger on either side of the tiny animal head. *Zing!* The blade vanished. "Here, sonny, you hold him."

Almost with reverence, Jamie took the marvelous creation. He turned it over and over, speechless at the perfection of detail, the smoothness, the brilliance.

"Go ahead. Make him stick out his tongue."

The boy obeyed. Magic beyond belief! The silver streak of knife-blade shimmered. A gentle pressure and it was gone!

"Sonny, that there jimrig's yours."

"But I—" Jamie faltered.

"Why not? You want him. I can tell by the look on your face. Me'n you is going to be friends."

The little golden dog burned in Jamie's hand. He cleared his throat.

The stranger was looking at the cabin. A puzzling smile arched the scar in his cheek. "What's that, sonny?" he asked.

"I said I wouldn't have much use for this," Jamie said levelly, thrusting the animal into the man's hand. "It's no good for sticking, or skinning." The

words ached in his chest. "Now I got to get the water."

"Well, if you want it that way—no hair offen my hide. Go about your chores. I'm aiming to stretch out here a space. Then I'm coming down."

"But—" Jamie began.

"But what, sonny?" the man asked. "I got to be sociable. I ain't been visiting for some time."

Brusquely Jamie spilled out the juice-stained water in the pail. When he returned from the spring, the man was lying on his saddle blanket. His hat covered his face. Noiselessly Jamie skirted the still form. "Tell your ma to put on her spankiest dress," spoke up the stranger with an odd laugh.

By the time Jamie had replaced the wooden lid on the water tub, he felt an overpowering weakness in his knees. He sat down heavily on the chopping block. He had to think. His father had said "You're grown up now, Jamie."

No, he wasn't. He was scared. Of what, exactly, he wasn't sure. Not of the stranger's size, or his scar. It was something you couldn't see.

HIS glance through the open door fell upon the blue steel of the carbine above the fireplace. A spurt of elation flamed through him. He went inside and took it down from the pegs. Holding his breath, he inched down the lever. Good! At once he felt strong. He'd go right up to the stranger. Tell him the sooner he hit the trail, the better.

Sure. That was the thing to do. But supposing the stranger didn't scare easy, supposing that—

Slowly he replaced the gun.

The weary arc of his back sagged once more against the woodpile when he went back to it. This time, his eyes focused on the clothes line. Drearily they followed the dun-colored succession of breeches, shirts, and socks, coming to rest momentarily on the bright yellow of his mother's new calico apron.

A thought occurred to him. The stranger was tired. He'd rest awhile, take his meal with them and be gone. But why had he said what he had about Jamie's mother and the dress?

Suddenly Jamie was on his feet, fumbling at the clothes-line. He knew where he'd seen a straight sapling pole. He raced to find it. Faster than his beating heart, his fingers strove with the folding, the squaring off, the knots. Then he was back at the cabin, reaming the pole end into a knothole by the door.

He sat down on the bottom step to wait. Drops of sweat stood out at his temples. With the back of his hand he brushed them away. The minutes lagged. Plucking a dried grass stalk, he chewed the end of it. The taste was bitter in his mouth.

Inside the cabin, Baby Jennifer whimpered.

Jamie started. There was no answering stir. He continued his vigil.

Suddenly a long shadow fell like a dark blotch across the sunshine. His whole body triggered, he looked up.

The stranger's hat was tilted to the back of his head, the sunlight accentuating the ragged scar. The smile was no longer puzzling. It had become a sneer.

Jamie stood up. Defiantly he lifted his head. At that moment, the stranger caught sight of the pole. He whistled sharply. Then, with great swinging strides, he was gone.

From the corner of the cabin, Jamie watched until the pinto mare was out of sight. When he turned around, his mother was standing in the open doorway. He had never seen her looking so pretty. A flapping noise overhead drew her attention.

"Why, Jamie, what on earth have you done with my new apron? Hanging it up like a flag on the end of that pole! You haven't torn it now, have you?"

"No, ma'am," he replied, the two words flowing out of him like water through a broken beaver dam.

"I must say, for a young 'un you do take the queerest notions. Why, anybody coming this way might think we had the smallpox!" ● ● ●

He struck Jim a terrific blow

It took the Mexican Army to beat . .

JIM BOWIE and his KNIFE

a true story by

NORMAN B. WILTSEY

FOR about a decade before the manufacture in limited quantity of Sam Colt's famous six-shooter, the favorite personal weapon of American fighting men everywhere was the Bowie knife. Although constructed faithfully to Jim Bowie's original design—plus one all-important added feature—the dread killer blade was actually the product of an Arkansas cutler, James Black.

Black, one of the early settlers in Hempstead County, Arkansas, possessed a secret process or technique for hardening and tempering steel that unfailingly produced superior knives capable of maintaining a razor edge under all conditions of use. In a life-or-death struggle be-

tween two evenly matched knife-fighters, such a blade could mean the difference between living and dying.

The fame of "Black's Blades" traveled far, and eventually reached the attentive ears of Jim Bowie in Texas. Big Jim came riding up the Chihuahua Trail in December of 1830 to inspect these wonder weapons for himself. He needed just such a knife for "peculiar reasons" of his own.

Ten minutes spent in Black's well-fitted workshop convinced Bowie that the serious young knifesmith was every bit the wizard in fine metals his satisfied Texas customers claimed him to be. Promptly Jim whittled out a model from a block of soft wood and requested Black to copy it in his best steel. Black studied the model thoroughly and promised delivery of the finished weapon in thirty days.

Four weeks later, Bowie returned to Black's workshop to pick up his knife. The master cutler laid out two knives on a bench for his inspection.

"You will observe," explained Black, touching the shimmering blade on the left, "that I have followed your specifications exactly in making *this* knife. Fourteen-inch blade, single-edge with brass fighting guard on the back, the hilt equipped with a three-inch crossguard, handle of seasoned black walnut in one piece. An excellent weapon: long enough for thrusting, sharp enough for slashing, heavy enough for striking and parrying."

NOW BLACK picked up the knife at the right of the bench, holding it lightly and carefully in his sensitive craftsman's fingers.

"Here, Mr. Bowie, I have introduced what I believe to be a valuable innovation in weapons of this type. This knife is an exact replica of the other, *except* that it is double-edged for a space of two and one-half inches from the curve of the point to the tip of the blade. The essential fighting guard has not been sacrificed; yet the knife's effectiveness as a weapon is greatly increased. I hardly need point out to a man of your experience the immense combat advantage of such a feature."

Bowie chuckled. "Neatly put, Mr. Black!" He took the double-edged knife from the cutler and deftly shaved a few hairs from his own muscular forearm with the reverse side of the blade. Jim's deep-set gray eyes glinted with sardonic humor as he drawled: "Your contention is absolutely correct; though set forth with needless delicacy. What you *meant* to say, of course, was that this two-edged blade can *kill* a man with a slash or stroke in any direction! I shall therefore pick this knife instead of the other. Also, Sir, please accept my order for two more exactly like it."

If ever a man could be said to have been born under a dark and turbulent star, that man was Jim Bowie. He was not a duelist and never picked a fight in his life, yet he became embroiled in more scenes of bloody violence than any man the American frontier has ever known with the exception of the psychopathic Indian killer, Lew Wetzel.

Six feet and 180 pounds of rawboned strength and catlike agility, the mere sight of Jim Bowie gliding swiftly into close quarters behind his glittering fourteen-inch blade was frequently enough to sicken an opponent's stomach and turn his guts to water before the first slash or thrust of the fight itself. The awesome, the terrifying thing about Bowie was the oft-proven fact that painful or serious wounds only intensified his savage lust to kill once he'd begun to fight.

Human parallels lacking, it is necessary to turn to the animal world to find a reasonable counterpart of Jim Bowie. And even here, only the grizzly—that terrible battler known to Indian hunters as "The Real Bear"—could be properly classed with Jim.

Born in Logan County, Kentucky, on April 10, 1796, Jim Bowie moved with his family to Catahoula Parish, Louisiana, around 1800. From the first, Jim loved the lonely marshes and dim winding waterways of the bayou country. The boy received little formal "book learning," but absorbed thorough practical training

in woodcraft and shooting from his father and older brothers.

As a youngster, Jim was fascinated by knives and spent much time whittling or throwing a blade at a mark blazed on a tree. Unlike his brothers, he preferred his knife to a gun. Pressed for an explanation, Jim declared simply—as if the reason were self-evident—that a knife was "always loaded."

Ever restless and as he grew older, increasingly intolerant of parental restraint, Jim Bowie left his father's comfortable house in 1814 to live alone in the wilderness. He built a shack upon remote Bayou Boeuf in Rapides Parish and set about clearing off a piece of virgin land.

THE life was just about as primitive as any adventurous young man could wish. Jim explored gloomy channels through dense-walled vegetation in his pirogue, drifted contentedly beneath moss-hung cypresses and live oaks on flower-strewn waters where the only sounds were the plaintive lament of mourning doves, the whooping call of the great white cranes and the dismal croaking of stilt-legged blue herons.

For more exciting diversion there were always wild horses to be caught, deer to be captured and tamed and alligators to be roped and knifed. Life was seldom dull on Bayou Boeuf and when it threatened to become stagnant, Jim went out in the woods and caught himself a bear to liven things up a bit.

The method he devised was hardly humane, but it certainly was ingenious and extremely effective. In the middle of a forest trail frequented by bears, Jim placed a hollow cypress knee baited with several pounds of honey. Through the sides of the wooden cylinder a circle of sharp iron spikes were driven, with the filed points slanting downward inside. The devilish contrivance was anchored to stout trees on both sides of the trail, the ropes being concealed beneath a scattering of brush.

Soon poor hungry Bruin came shambling along the trail, was irresistibly attracted by the smell of honey and stuck his greedy snout into the trap. The spikes held him fast when he tried to withdraw his muzzle and rendered him an easy victim for the expert knife-work of his captor.

Even alligator roping and bear trapping palled upon young Bowie eventually. Inevitably he acquired a sweetheart or two in the rapidly growing settlement down the bayou, and promptly made the jolting discovery that he needed money as well as youth and vigor to hold a popular girl against the competition of better-heeled rivals.

Accordingly, Jim sold his cleared land for a sizeable stake and undertook to multiply it by speculating in the illegal African slave trade. Early in 1818, Jim and his older brothers, John and Rezin, journeyed to Texas on a business visit to the camp of pirate and blackbirder Jean Lafitte on San Luis Island (now Galveston).

The swashbuckling Lafitte took an instant liking to Jim Bowie, and sold him all the "Black Ivory" he could handle at one dollar a pound. The crafty brothers then sneaked the wretched slaves by boat into the territorial limits of the United States and self-righteously turned them over to a custom-house officer, representing themselves as "informers."

The law entitled them to an informer's fee of one half the value of the slaves when sold by a Government Marshal. Of course, as the curious law allowed, they immediately bought back the Negroes from the marshal at half-price; receiving an official bill of sale granting them the right to market their human merchandise legally within the United States.

This lucrative racket enabled the enterprising Bowie brothers to clean up a tidy bankroll of $65,000 before they tired of the sordid business. After an expensive week-long frolic with Jean Lafitte and his merry buccaneers, the boys headed for home. Travelers had informed them of the rising land boom in Rapides Parish, and the trio were anxious to cash in on the opportunity held out to keen young fellows with nerve and ready capital. Jim

Bowie eagerly planned to triple his stake at the exciting new game.

IT WAS naturally impossible for an adventurer of Bowie's fiery temperament to maneuver long at land speculation without running head first into trouble. Despite a knack for making money, Jim was a fast man with a dollar and consequently was often broke at the precise moment he needed funds to swing some important deal or protect a valuable property from foreclosure. Major Norris Wright, a director of the local Alexandria bank, refused Jim a loan in the Summer of 1827 that would have saved him fifteen hundred acres of rich black-loam farming land.

The circumstances attending the major's curt refusal were—to put it mildly—hectic. Bowie made some pointed remarks concerning Wright's miserly nature and doubtful ancestry, and the banker countered sharply with a nasty crack about "marsh rats who tried to set themselves up as fine gentlemen." After that venomous exchange of compliments, an early killing was indicated.

Certain odds-minded citizens of Alexandria made sporting wagers on when the lethal event would occur and the identity of the survivor. Shrewd gamblers figured Jim Bowie a standout choice to kill Wright the very next time the pair met face to face. As it happened, the wise boys were slightly premature in their astute calculations.

Bowie and Wright met on the street a couple of weeks after the bank episode and exceeded themselves in the art of mutual insult. Running short of words, Wright drew a pistol and fired. The hastily aimed ball glanced from Bowie's ribs, inflicting a painful wound. Disregarding the wound, Jim knocked the major cold with a single punch. Fortunately for the banker, Bowie wasn't packing his knife at the time of this second clash.

The bitter feud between the two men climaxed swiftly in the famous Battle of Vidalia Sandbar on the Louisiana side of the Mississippi opposite Natchez.

Jim and the major had gone to the sandbar in the early morning of September 19, 1827, as members of different parties to act as seconds for friends in a duel precipitated by a gossipy woman's wagging tongue. The duel itself, a farcical affair in which principals Sam Wells and Tom Maddox missed each other twice with pistols at ten paces, turned out to be a comedy preceding grim tragedy.

Duelists Wells and Maddox, sensibly considering their impugned honor amply vindicated by the second harmless exchange of shots, grinned sheepishly and walked toward each other to shake hands. Barely had Tom and Sam met in friendly conversation when the smouldering hatreds existing between their respective seconds flamed into bloody action.

Jim Bowie and General Sam Cuny led one faction, Major Wright and Colonel Bob Crain the other. Crain got in the first pistol shot, hitting Bowie in the hip although aiming at Cuny. Almost simultaneously Cuny shot Crain through his gun arm. Crain drew a second pistol with his left hand and drilled Cuny through the heart.

Bowie, knocked down by Crain's first shot, jumped up and rushed Bob with drawn butcher knife. Crain struck Jim a terrific blow on the head with his clubbed pistol, dropping him flat on his face. Indomitably, Jim raised himself to his hands and knees and started to crawl toward his jittery enemy. Crain dropped his empty pistol and departed the sandbar at top speed.

Cautious Major Wright, hovering in the background, now rushed up boldly to skewer Bowie with his sword-cane. The stiletto-like blade broke off in Jim's chest when the gallant Major tried to withdraw it for a finishing thrust. Before Wright could get away, Jim caught him by the hand and draggd him down within reach. The butcher knife flashed once, and Wright lay disemboweled upon the reddening sand.

AL BLANCHARD now rashly tried to avenge the major. At a range of

twenty feet Blanchard took careful aim with his pistol and fired. His hand shook so badly he misssed Jim's heart and hit him in the left arm. Bowie roared like a wounded grizzly, lurched to his feet and charged Blanchard before he could reload. One sweep of the dripping butcher knife stripped the flesh from the bones of Blanchard's right forearm. Al fled, screaming in agony. Jim staggered after him, cursing hoarsely until blood from his chest wound clogged in his throat and he fell unconscious. The brief, furious fight was over.

Doctor Cuny, a brother of the deceased general, went to work on Bowie at once, extracting the broken sword-blade from his chest and deftly removing the bullets from his hip and left arm with scalpel and forceps. Wrapped in bandages and still only semi-conscious, Jim was carried aboard a ferryboat for the trip across the river to Natchez.

Bowie remained in Natchez at the home of friends for six months until his wounds healed. Completely recovered at last, Jim felt the need of a change of scene. He sold off enough of his Louisiana land holdings to provide him with a fresh stake, and headed southwest for Texas.

Jogging down the Chihuahua Trail on the way back to San Antonio after purchasing his new blade from James Black in Arkansas, Bowie reflected on the past two years of his life and found them good. Since quitting Louisiana in the spring of 1828, Jim had become a noted resident of Texas as well as a conditional citizen of Mexico.

He rode now to marry his fiancée, the aristocratic Castilian beauty, Maria Ursula, daughter of Don Juan Martin de Veramendi, Lieutenant-Governor of Coahuila and Texas. Bowie's fertile mind was full of grand, sweeping plans for the future. Down on the San Saba there was a fabulously rich lost silver mine he aimed to find. Also he was pledged to build the Mexican Government a cotton textile mill to fulfill the conditions of his citizenship in that country. . . .

Three knife-swinging desperados leaping at him from the underbrush beside the trail brought Jim's rosy daydream to a jarring halt. One man grabbed his horse's bridle, the others closed in on both sides.

Bowie instantly recognized his attackers as henchmen of an implacable enemy—one Jack Sturdivant, a Natchez gambler and killer who carried a permanently crippled right arm as a stern memento of a hand-to-hand encounter with Jim Bowie. The recognition spurred Jim into executing the fastest and deadliest feat of knife-play in his adventurous career.

Kicking one attacker in the face, Jim ducked forward along his horse's neck, whipped out his new knife and sliced off the first assassin's head. Jumping to the ground, he caught the second man rushing in guard high and gave him an expert "Butcher's Twist," disemboweling him. Horrified, the third assailant dashed for the woods. Snarling the fierce snarl of the fighting grizzly who sees his prey escaping, Jim overtook Sturdivant's hired thug in two strides and split his skull to the teeth with a full-armed overhand stroke from behind.

Thirty seconds . . . three men dead!

Bowie meticulously cleaned his knife on the cotton shirt of his third and last victim, sheathed the blade and resumed his journey.

IT WAS Jim Bowie's dark destiny that his splendid dreams for the future never materialized, being first clouded by misfortune and then extinguished by great personal tragedy. He married his lovely Maria immediately upon his return to San Antonio, but his subsequent time of boundless joy was cruelly brief. Wounded by hostile Indians on his unsuccessful hunt for the lost San Saba Mine in November of 1831, Jim returned home to recuperate and to make plans for the war with Mexico he knew was coming.

On August 4, 1832, he struck the first real blow for Texas independence by heading a company of Texan volunteers that captured a Mexican garrison commanded by Colonel José de las Piedras,

and marched them as prisoners to San Antonio. Nothing came of the bold stroke, as the Mexican Government did not retaliate and Texans did not catch fire from his exploit as he had hoped.

During 1833, Jim's wife and two children died of cholera while on a visit to Maria's old home in Monclova. The tragedy shook Bowie as nothing had ever done, and for months afterward he rode alone about the country trying to find some purpose and meaning to life. He found what he was seeking in the renewal of his fight for Texas independence.

In October of 1835, Bowie again joined the Texan volunteers and fought with Colonel Fannin at the Mission Concepcion near San Antonio in a battle in which 92 sharpshooting Texans defeated 400 Mexicans. Nearly half the enemy were casualties in this engagement, while the Texans lost but a single man. One month later, Bowie and his vastly outnumbered volunteers whipped a force of Mexican irregulars near San Antonio. Following that second victory, Jim received his Colonel's commission.

Mexican regulars moved strongly against the embattled Texans late in February of 1836, surrounding the old mission-fortress of the Alamo in San Antonio. Within the adobe walls of the besieged Alamo, 187 Texans commanded by Colonels Travis and Bowie awaited the final all-out enemy attack.

A motley crew, this little band gathered in the Alamo to fight to the death for Texas independence: lean, buckskin-clad hunters from the remote back-country, desperados "on the dodge" from the law in other parts of the Southwest, men from Jim Bowie's old stamping grounds along Louisiana's Red River, adventurers in homespun from Kentucky and Tennessee.

Colonel Jim, burning with fever and suffering constant pain from a broken hip sustained in a fall from a scaffold, lay on a cot directing his volunteers. He knew the fate in store for them. Two loaded horse-pistols and his knife lay ready at his side to meet it when it came.

Day by day the earthworks thrown up by the Mexican engineers crept closer to the walls of the Alamo. Hour by hour the deadly cordon tightened about the handful of defenders within. Not a man of the tiny garrison attempted a last-minute escape through the Mexican lines at night. Not a man suggested surrender.

ON THE gray, dismal morning of March 6, scout Davy Crockett looked out at the on-creeping hordes of Mexicans and knew that the moment of the attack was at hand. Quietly he laid aside his fiddle, checked the priming of his long rifle, honed his knife and with the naked blade made the Apache sign for Death.

Twenty minutes later, the *Deguello*—the No Quarter Call—sounded from the Mexican bugles, and the assault began. The rifles of the defenders cracked out a ragged volley, but the attackers came on steadily. These soldiers were not raw irregulars, but trained troops led by trained officers. They swarmed into the fort in a resistless wave—battering down doors, shooting, thrusting with their bayonets, killing without mercy.

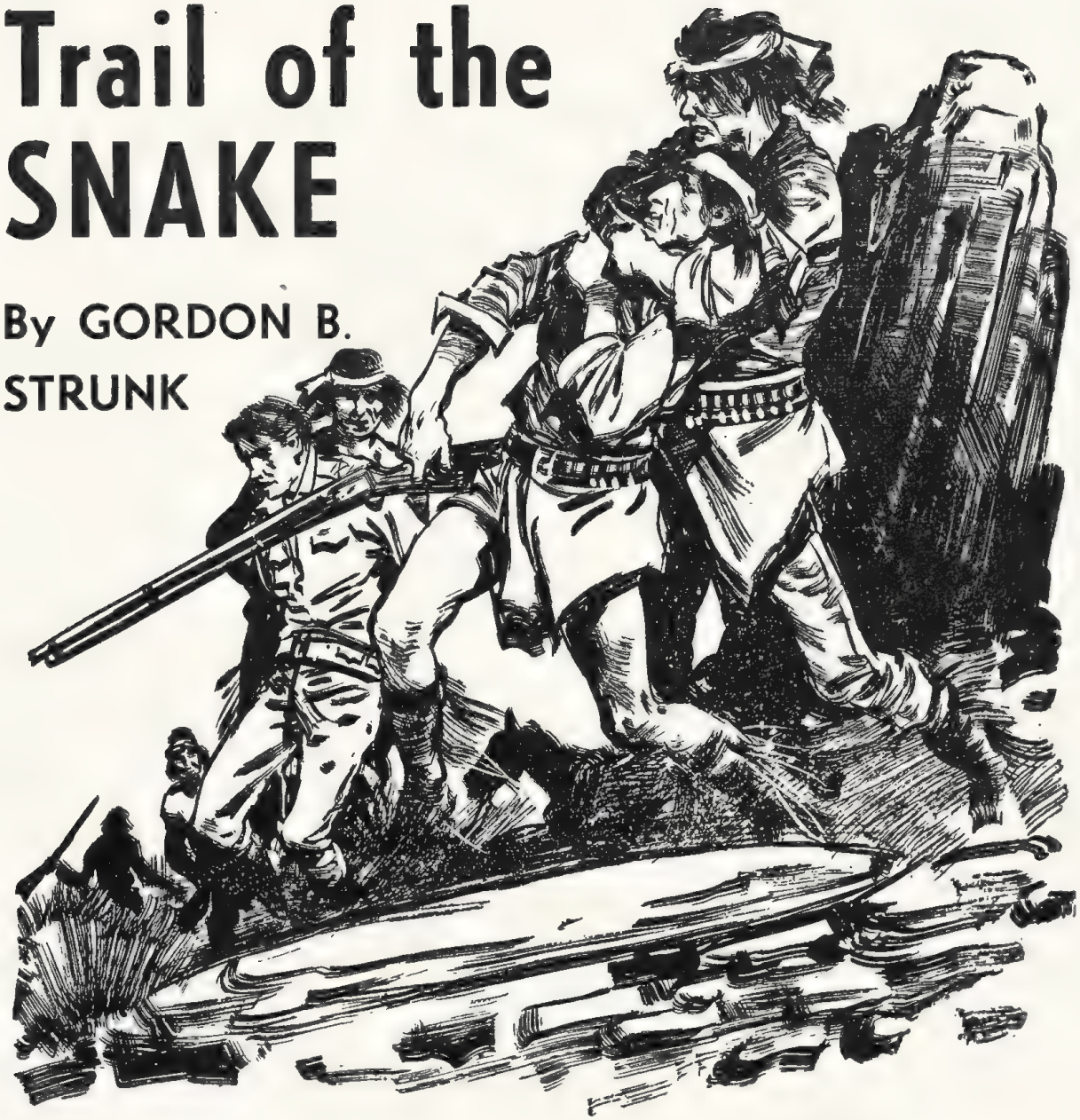
The unequal struggle was quickly over—except in one small central room where a gaunt crippled man, protecting two women and two children, fought like a wounded grizzly at bay.

Two assailants fell to Bowie's pistols, and then his fourteen-inch blade flashed and reddened, taking its terrible toll. Nine foemen died in that ghastly, swirling mêlée before the plunging bayonets found their mark and the gaunt man lay motionless on his gory cot.

A young Mexican captain, after first punctiliously assuring the terrified women that they and their children would not be harmed, snapped smartly to attention at Bowie's bedside and saluted the dead *Americano*. *"El Coronel muy valiente!"* he breathed in admiration—and stooped to pick up the bloody knife where it had fallen from the limp right hand. Carefully the youthful officer wiped clean the blade with his immaculate silken scarf and replaced the freshly gleaming weapon in Jim Bowie's hand. ● ● ●

Trail of the SNAKE

By GORDON B. STRUNK



"Drop your guns, or he dies. Then do as I say!"

MAJOR CALL looked up expectantly at the swarthy sergeant before the desk, glad of the interruption. Any diversion from the monotony of poring over requisitions and reports here in the sweltering oven he called his office was welcome.

"Yes, Rodriguez?" He was pleasant, interested.

In the dimness of the room the man appeared to be a Negro. Momentarily the major was grateful that he was not subject to the hellish duty of the enlisted men and junior officers who sweated and

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The sergeant was half Apache, so he knew only too well the grisly torture in store for a white hostage—especially a lieutenant

blistered and became like leather under the merciless sun of the Arizona wastelands.

"Sir, I request permission to go after Lieutenant Morgan. I have a plan." The Mexican was hurrying, fearful of being halted abruptly in the discussion of what he knew was a delicate, sore spot with Major Call. The major's hand slammed down hard on the desk and his voice exploded in anger.

"Morgan is a deserter! Our job here is to herd Indians, not waste manpower chasing soft-bellied deserters. He'll be dealt with at the proper time and place."

The utter loathing of the regular Army officer for a deserter twisted the man's face into an iron mask. His rage was at Morgan, not the sergeant. As he sensed the non-com's humiliation, he regretted his harshness, but, damn it, he thought, can't these men figure anything out for themselves. Bad enough, he reflected wryly, that he had only half enough men needed to man the godforsaken outpost and ride herd on the treacherous devils they called Apaches, without Morgan, his best officer, picking this time to desert. War clouds were all about them, visible in the burnished Arizona skies and his one officer who had the most experience with them and seemed to out-think the devils, had scooted.

"The lieutenant is not a deserter, sir!" Rodriguez said it doggedly and firmly, yet with the proper respect.

Major Call's eyes narrowed as he squinted in the gloom in an effort to see te sergeant's eyes clearly.

"You seem pretty positive, Sergeant?" he said. "Everyone on this post has heard him threaten a hundred times to desert. You've heard him say it, haven't you?"

"Yes sir, I have, but I have also heard every man on this post say the same thing—with the exception of yourself, sir. It's a habit. We have to gripe about something, or we're not soldiers. Here, it's the heat and dust and the Apaches. I myself have often threatened to desert. Lieutenant Morgan did not mean it any more than I do, sir."

Call was interested now.

"Then what do you mean 'go after Morgan'?"

Sir," Rodriguez said firmly, convincingly; "Lieutenant Morgan is a prisoner of the Apaches. I know it because I know the lieutenant and more, I know the Apaches."

"How do you know so damned much?" snapped the Major, a bit ruffled at the sergeant's postitve, knowing tone.

"My mother was an Apache, sir. I was raised on the reservation after my father, who was Mexican, was killed. My mother returned to her people, but I remained with the Americans. But I know Apaches. I know how they think; what they want; what they will try. I know that this Sicachi has had only one thought since he was a boy: to wipe out the whites and lead his people to freedom. He ran away from the reservation when he was only eight. He lived out in the desert, like a lizard or a snake, and became silent, deadly, treacherous. His name, in the desert tongue, means 'the snake.'

"Lieutenant Morgan has chased him for six years, sir, and I have ridden and lived with Morgan for those years. When Morgan captured Sicachi and you sent only the lieutenant and two enlisted men to deliver him for trial, you were a fool!"

RODRIGUEZ darted a hasty look of apology at the startled officer, and hastened to explain.

"Begging your pardon, sir. I meant that if you had known more of the Apache ways, you would have sent a complete detachment." The major seemed mollified and the sergeant continued. "Sicachi has many followers. He has recruited the young men, telling them of the lives they will lead when they have driven the white men back and are free again. The followers of the Snake have watched this post day and night for a sign of what we intended to do with their leader. It was child's play

to take him away from only three men."

The major's eyes hardened at the reminder of the loss of his most important prisoner.

"Yes, and rather than fight as the other two men did, who were killed, Morgan ran for it. He probably got away, too, and figured he'd face a court martial anyhow for running, and deserted ."

"No!"

Juan Rodriguez flared back now, and he served warning with his black eyes that the officer-enlisted man relationship had gone, for the moment. It was man-to-man, and no punches pulled.

"Major, I served six years with Lieutenant Morgan. I slept and ate with him. Twice I even saved his life. I wandered through half of Arizona Territory with Morgan. I think I can say that I know him better than any man on earth. You've only known him a few months. If you knew him as I do, you'd know that Morgan must have been taken in the raid that freed Sicachi. Otherwise, Morgan's body would have been found beside the others, because he's a man who would fight as long as he could lift a gun, or his fist or feet.

"Besides, the feeling between Sicachi and Morgan is something you may not understand. Though they never saw one another until Morgan captured him, Sicachi and Morgan knew each other well—like the deer knows the hunter. They hated and feared and respected one another so deeply that they knew one another like brothers. I know the Apache mind, and Sicachi would give almost anything to turn the tables and take his captor prisoner. It would wipe out the stain on his own honor. It was a sort of a deadly game those two played, these years; but the game is over now, and the forfeit must be paid.

"That's why you've got to let me go now—and fast—while there's still time. It isn't pleasant to think of what might be happening to Lieutenant Morgan right now. You've never seen a man the Apaches wanted to keep alive, and at the same time put through hell, Major—I have."

He paused here to let the import of his words impress the major whose shocked eyes showed only too clearly how well he understood.

"Morgan is a special enemy, and a special prize, and for him it would be their most fiendish tortures. You must know that the Apache is an artist at torment, Major. Some of them become almost exquisite.

"Please, Major Call, let me go while there is still time!"

Major Call ran a browned hand through his stiff shock of iron gray hair, indecision still evident in his eyes.

"Sergeant, I appreciate what you're trying to do but, even if Morgan is a prisoner as you seem to think, I couldn't send men out to try a rescue now. You must know the situation here. The scouts report trouble, big trouble, cooking up out there in that damned oven. It may break at any moment now, and I can't risk the lives of needed men. We can't risk weakening the detachment here at this time. I'm sorry, Sergeant Rodriguez—but your request is denied."

The sergeant stepped forward impulsively and leaned on the desk, his face pleading.

"I mean alone, Major—a whole group of men couldn't reach Morgan, but I might be able to, alone! I don't know what I'll do when I find him, but I'm sure he's still alive. Sicachi would want to keep him alive as long as the lieutenant can hold out, he'd want to enjoy every minute of Morgan's torture. Please, Major—" He leaned forward tensely, eagerness and pleading in his eyes.

MAJOR CALL massaged his chin thoughtfully, weighing the advisability of the sergeant's proposal and his chances of success. It might be worth a gamble at that, he reflected. After all, Morgan was a good soldier, and he owed it to his clean record to give him the benefit of the doubt. This chance, meager as it seemed, might keep the officer alive and clear his record. The major hated

to stamp as the final word to Morgan's Army career that ignoble word: DESERTED.

"What would you propose to do, Sergeant?" he inquired cautiously, not yet ready to commit himself.

But Rodriguez knew he had practically won. He babbled eagerly, "When I strip and put on Apache clothes, Major, you wouldn't know me. I'll paint myself up as an Apache and ride one of those Apache mustangs we captured a few days ago. Thanks to my mother I speak the tongue well and look the part. I'll have to have a small patrol go out with me for a short distance. The post is closely watched. If I rode out as an Apache, they'd know it was a trick and I'd be dead before I got out of sight of the post. But with a platoon, or small group, riding out to scout, I can drop out in an arroyo, and no one will miss me. I'll bury my uniform, then head out into the desert. I have a pretty good idea where Sicachi might be. If I find it, maybe I can free Morgan. If I can't, I'll promise you this: I'll take a few Apaches to hell with me—and the first shot will go right into the head of Sicachi."

Major Call shook his head, grinning.

"I'm a fool, Rodriguez, but you're a bigger one. I guess when a man has enough faith in another man to throw his life away for him, it'd take a harder man than me to say he couldn't have his chance. Get ready."

Rodriguez, smiling broadly, snapped to a smart salute.

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

Major Call watched him silhouetted momentarily against the burning sunlight of the doorway; then he was gone. Call sat staring after him, wondering why in hell any man, red, white, black or whatever, wanted to fight over this damnable arid, useless section of hell. He sighed and reached for the papers again.

RODRIGUEZ took in the solid stretch of silver that was the desert under the moon. Deep inside, for a fleeting instant, he felt a kindred spirit to the lonely, savage people of his mother. He understood the lure of this wasteland for their wild hearts; knew their tragic love for the parched, heat-wracked wastes which surrounded him. Perhaps everyone should see the desert as he now viewed it, he mused.

The only sound to break the stillness of the whole world was the soft sloppy sound of the pony's hooves on the sand. It had grown chill, and Rodriguez missed the soldier's tunic, unused as he was to riding half naked. The cool set in suddenly, once the sun had gone, but for now, Rodriguez must be an Apache in every action and thought.

He smiled to himself as he thought of the faces of his comrades if they could only see him now. He wore a gaudy calico shirt, red cloth leggings wrapped almost to his knees, and his straight black hair was parted in the middle and secured by a ragged red cloth around his forehead. Worn levis and moccasins completed his attire, except for the rifle and ammunition he carried.

His grin faded quickly. He knew that the chill at the back of his neck was not of the night. His hair tingled and his flesh crawled warningly. He knew that from somewhere out there, eyes watched his every movement. Without turning his head, he darted his beady eyes cautiously about him, alerted for the slightest movement. Not a living thing moved, yet, they were out there. He could feel the nervous tension of the pony as the little animal's gait became mincing, unwilling. It's eyes dilated and rolled wildly, alerted by some dim instinct against the presence of the unseen and unknown.

He checked the animal with his knees, feeling it tremble as it halted. Though he kept it hidden, Rodriguez felt doubly nervous, all senses abnormally sharp under the prod of danger.

Then he saw them. Rather, he knew where they lay concealed, flat on the ground, like snakes, behind some low rocks ahead. It was the only thing in sight big enough to conceal a man. They

had to be there!

He faced the rocks, throwing his arms high in the air.

His voice sounded magnified and thunderous in the deathly silence of the desert night.

"I am brother of Sicachi, come to join his band of death. Show yourselves, oh brothers of the Snake."

As his voice died, vast, unutterable silence closed in once more. But Juan Rodriguez saw his pony's ears flick toward a sound, and the nostrils flared. He knew the pony had detected movement, near the rocks, gray and ghostly in the moonlight.

Four dark blobs rose like wraiths, or mist rising over a lake of silver. They stood motionless a moment, watching warily. At last one shadow detached itself from the mass and approached, taking shape and color and emerging as an Apache warrior. Rodriguez could make out the black lines of paint on forehead and cheek, symbol of the warpath to the death.

"Rider of the lonely night, what is your name?" he asked in Apache.

The sergeant answered truthfully with the Indian name his mother had given.

"I am Ysalivai, 'the black one.' I have returned from the prison of the white man, far across the desert. I desire to join my brother, Sicachi in his war against the white conquerors. I wish to live once more as an Apache."

He used the correct pronunciation of the word, knowing that the white men had garbled it badly. The very word Apachu meant "enemy" in the desert tongue, chosen by the Apaches themselves, and well, for they had set their hand and brain against every other living creature, and by so doing, had set every man's hand against them.

A silence fell, during which Rodriguez knew they were judging him.

"Dismount, Ysalivai, and follow. I will take you to Sicachi." The lone figure said at last.

Juan dismounted unhurriedly, careful of every movement now. As he walked behind the leader, the other three fell in behind him.

A MILE farther on, they remounted their ponies where they had left them, and as the ghostly procession moved across the silveryed ground, Juan's thoughts went back fearfully to the stories his mother had told him of the Apachu's treatment of enemies who were luckless enough to be taken alive. They reserved the most excruciating torture for the traitor, he recalled, for one of Apachu blood who betrayed his own.

He wondered grimly if he were not foolhardy to have attempted such a desperate coup. These were not men—not humans. They were more like reptiles from some dark, dank world, uncivilized and unreasoning, understanding only lust for blood and pain and death! Though he spoke their tongue and even carried their blood, he knew that he could never lie with his eyes and his actions, for no power on earth could summon to his being the flat, naked death which lay behind their inhuman masks. It was something that came from the heart and brain—an ugly, immeasurable, horror.

He pushed aside the desolate thoughts, planning what he would do when he reached Sicachi's camp. But he came up against a mental wall, knowing that he would have to fashion every thought and move at the moment, depending entirely on the circumstances at the time.

He was surprised at the shortness of the ride. Less than two hours after his contact with them, the Apaches led him up a narrow ledge trail to a high, flat plateau. Atop the mesa he saw several blanketed figures lying about. Far off glowed the dull embers of a dying fire, and near this were other Apaches.

It was obvious by the sleeping figures, that the Post was well watched at all times, and the Indians knew they were in no danger of a night attack.

Rodriguez's eyes darted about quickly. He wondered where Morgan was. He

chilled at the thought that Morgan might be already dead and he was sacrificing himself in vain. But he still felt strongly that Sicachi would not let Morgan die this quickly.

They stopped before the dying fire and a lean figure rose and approached them. By the attitude of the others, Juan sensed that this was Sicachi, and suddenly he recalled that the Snake had seen him before—just once, and for a fleeting instant, but would his foxlike brain retain that fleeting glimpse? There was nothing to do now but to pray, and Rodriguez did, asking the Holy Virgin to stay with him.

Across the fire Sicachi halted, pinning him with penetrating, cold eyes. Juan met his stare openly. He was hoping that if he discovered his identity, Sicachi might betray it by his eyes and give him one slim chance to kill the Indian leader before they swarmed over him. But as he gazed at the ugly, yet fascinating face of the outlaw Apache, he knew that no emotion on earth could ever break that inscrutable mask. Sicachi's face was as impassive as stone. How well named he is, Juan thought with a shudder of awe. It was like looking into the blood-chilling, nauseating eyes of a diamond-back rattler.

The leader told Sicachi of meeting him, and his name.

"Ysalivai." Sicachi repeated it suspiciouly. "I do not know you. From where do you come?"

"I was raised on the very reservation with you, my brother." Rodriguez answered, praying his Apache was perfect. "As a youth I admired you, waited for the day I might become a grown warrior and join you. But I was caught stealing a gun and sent to prison. When released and sent back to the reservation I waited only long enough to get a pony. I have come to offer my blood, my heart, to my brother."

He inclined his head humbly as he finished.

"You were discovered near the white soldier's post. What were you doing there?" Sicachi asked, still coldly.

"I heard Sicachi was a prisoner there." Rodriguez silently thanked the Virgin for providing the correct words so quickly. "I had hoped to meet others who would join in freeing you. I was too late for my brother was already free. I was happy to find this so, and happy that three more of the white soldiers have been killed." He threw a daring bit of bait at Sicachi in the last, hoping that he would reveal whether Morgan still lived.

The black, unemotional eyes bored him unmercifully. Then, after a long moment, Sicachi nodded!

"Welcome, Ysalivai. We need many warriors to drive the white men out of our home. Rest well this night, for on the morrow, I will show you what happens to white soldiers who fall into the coils of the Snake."

Juan's heart leaped in joy. Morgan was still alive. He was being told that he would be privileged to watch the torture of the officer on the morrow.

HE FELL asleep under the sky, relaxed and weary after the tremendous tension of the past few hours, and slept soundly. He woke to the uncomfortable feeling that eyes were upon him, and, half-rising, he stared up into the cold eyes of Sicachi. They were black and fathomless, revealing nothing. What he saw there might be amusement, or hatred, or nothing.

Studying the lines of the cruel face, Juan was tempted to kick it into a horrible, bloodly mess, just to see if this inhuman thing could betray, or even feel, any emotion.

"Come!" Sicachi said coldly. Rodriguez rose, flexing his arms and legs. Sicachi pointed to a spot a few yards away where several braves gathered, staring at something on the ground.

"Our prisoner is being fed. You will enjoy it," Sicachi said, shouldering a way among the Apaches. "The white soldier was not hungry last night. Perhaps this morning—" his voice held a slight

trace of mockery. Juan hoped that what he was to see wouldn't be too horrible, for if he retched at it, he would surely betray himself. The Apaches grunted gibes at the figure on the ground, and as he gained the inner edge of the circle, he saw Lieutenant Morgan. He lay on his back, stark naked, and Juan's first thought was one of gratitude that Morgan had not as yet been mutilated or crippled.

Each wrist and ankle was secured by buckskin to stakes driven deep in the earth, and squatting beside him was an Apache whose face matched Sicachi's for evilness. In his hand he clutched a live orange and black lizard which squirmed horribly, close to the cracked, dry lips of Morgan.

"Not hungry?" he was taunting the lieutenant in English.

Morgan stared defiantly into the savage's eyes, twisting to evade the touch of the gruesome lizard. There was contempt in his eyes, and Juan knew that he was looking at a brave man, worthy of whatever it cost to save him.

Sicachi advanced, staring down at Morgan with contempt, yet a vague admiration.

"Unless you taste it, how can you tell if it is good?" he said in perfect English.

The squatting man thrust the Gila monster close to Morgan's face, then suddenly he recoiled and wiped his hand across his eyes. Juan blanched with fear as he realized that Morgan had spit into his savage tormentor's face!

In a rage, he quickly thrust the lizard's head toward Morgan's face, intent on letting it deliver its deadly bite, but Sicachi's foot darted out like a snake, kicking the lizard out of the other's hand and landing it several feet away, where it scrambled madly for cover.

"Fool! Child!" spat Sicachi at the frightened Apache. "That is exactly what he wished you to do. He knows that it would be a welcome death to what awaits him." He glared at the circle of faces. "The one who lets the white soldier die before Sicachi commands it, takes his place until I am satisfied. Do not be fooled by any more such childish tricks!"

They stared at the ground, like chastened children, before his burning eyes. There was not a trace of resentment or protest in them. Sicachi ruled supreme, a devil of devils, yet, thus far, he had not broken the iron will of Lieutenant Morgan. Rodriguez shuddered to think of what might lie in store for his friend. He suddenly realized that pity might be showing on his face, and he looked sternly at Sicachi. But his eyes were on Morgan. He seemed to be sizing up the soldier to see how much he could take before life left his body.

"Bring the gourd and the snakes," he commanded of no one in particular, but several leaped to do his bidding.

THOUGH the sun had begun to make itself felt, Juan shivered at the command. Sicachi must be in a hurry, he thought in panic, for he was employing the devilish "Apache Pitcher."

He watched in fascination as it was rigged. A gourd of water was placed on a little platform of sticks, directly over Morgan's head and a foot above it. From a tiny crack in the bottom of the gourd, dripped steady beads of water, directly onto the bound man's forehead.

Two huge diamond-backs were brought; huge, deadly-looking specimens, squirming in rage. About the throat of each was a cleverly contrived little collar of thong, attached to a piece of buckskin two feet long. The Apaches carefully measured the distance the snake could strike, then drove two stakes into the ground on either side of Morgan's head. They fastened the loose end of the buckskin to the stakes securely so that when either rattler struck, he came within one inch of Morgan's face—if he kept it turned upward, where the water from the pitcher dripped onto his forehead. If he chose to turn his head sideways—his death would be somewhat quicker, but hardly less horrible. If he chose the water, it was only a matter of

time until the steady dripping smashed his reason and he died a raving maniac's death.

The Indians stepped back, watching; lust and cruelty on their faces. In spite of the sun's warmth and his cracked lips, sweat broke out on Morgan's face as the water began to make itself felt on his forehead. Rodriguez stepped forward, ostensibly to inspect the fiendish work, but he gazed down full into Morgan's eyes.

Morgan glared back contemptuously, playing his cards beautifully, but each man knew the other understood. Juan hoped the knowledge of his presenece would give added courage and endurance to Morgan until he could find the opportunity to make his move to free them both. He thought bitterly that, if worst came to worst, he would manage a bullet for Morgan before he smashed one into the brain of Sicachi. At least his friend would be spared the snakes, or the water.

The Apaches squatted about now, intent on watching the victim. Rodriguez eyed them warily, alert for the chance to catch them unawares. The moments dragged on. The sun rose higher, beginning to burn, adding to Morgan's torment as it beat into his eyes and on his half-raw skin.

The sky became a copper bowl. Even the Apaches shifted about uncomfortably under the tortuous heat, but their lust kept them constantly intent on Morgan's reactions. At his slightest movement, one or sometimes both of the rattlers would strike angrily, just missing his face, and becoming more angered with each thrust.

Juan watched the water drip, fascinated. Drip—drip—drip, until each drop that fell seemed to be hammering into his own brain. He gritted his teeth, desperately controlling the wild urge to fling himself wildly toward his gun and see what came of it. He kept telling himself that if he betrayed his identity now, it was slow, horrible death for both of them instead of at least a hope to live, as now existed.

Slowly, Juan became aware of a new discomfiture. He knew, without looking, that Sicachi's eyes were on him—watching, studying. He avoided looking at the leader until his nerves were screaming, then he met the cold, staring eyes. There was no mistaking the look now—satisfaction showed clearly. Sicachi knew him! Juan was about to break free of the circle, when Sicachi, by silent signal, instructed those near him to grab Juan.

Shaking, more in frustration and anger than in fear, he clenched his fists, knowing it was useless to struggle now. He stood with hate-filled eyes as Sicachi approached and stared at his cheeks and chin. He reached forth a hand and brushed his fingers along the flesh of Juan's jaw, and then he knew what had berayed him. His beard!

Since he had left the Post, his whiskers had begun to grow, a phenomenon unknown to the Apaches. It was this cruel trick of fate which had caught the shrewd Apache leader's eye.

Disdainfully Sicachi spoke, without excitement.

"Fool! You are the traitorous Rodriguez who fights his own people for white men's money." He leaned close and spat into Juan's face. Juan gritted his teeth, unflinching.

"We have a special hatred and a special punishment for those who betray their people."

EVEN as fear laid icy fingers on his heart, Rodriguez felt a great, passinate pity for the man on the ground. Morgan was rolling his eyes desperately to see what was going on without letting himself come within range of the rattlers. Juan was castigating himself bitterly for having failed. The price was now doubled: his life as well as Morgan's, and neither would have a pleasant death. Bitterly he wished he had simply ridden wildly into camp, sending a bullet into the head of the savage Sicachi and throwing his fate into the laps of the gods of chance. At least he would have accomplished a great thing: the removal

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of the instigator of the bloody uprisings which were sweeping Arizona.

Despair set deep on Morgan's face, now. He had clung desperately to hope while the water had become maddeningly more cruel, tottering his mind slightly, even in the short time he had endured it. He had told himself over and over that Rodriguez would devise something, somehow. Now he would soon be put to the torture of the devils of this private little hell called Arizona, and they would both suffer the tortures of the damned.

But Sicachi had other plans. There were other tortures besides physical ones, and he knew they could be equally horrible.

"The Apache traitor would rescue his white friend from Sicachi?" he taunted Juan. "Then you shall have your chance, black one." He motioned to the others to release Morgan. They obeyed instantly, removing the rattlers and freeing him. He looked amazed, as did Rodriguez, though both sensed that he doubtless had something more deliciously cruel in mind for them.

"One of you may go free to tell the white soldiers of Sicachi's defiance of them. Which one, you shall decide."

"But one shall remain, to taste the best which Sicachi can give in displeasure. It is but fair that he should endure double the pain, in order to pay for the other's freedom.

He shall have the supreme pleasure. His tongue will be cut out, then seared with brands so that he does not bleed too quickly. His eyelids shall be slit open and he shall be staked out on his back against the sun. Lastly, he shall be staked out on a hill of our little red brothers, the ants. It will be amusing to see which wins the race of death, the ants or the sun."

He looked at each of them individually, gloating.

"You will decide." He pointed to a stake and drew a line across the earth. "When the sun's beams throw the shadow of the stick there—you will have decided."

He beckoned the Apaches back, where they ringed the two men, rifles trained alertly on them, watching every move with beady, hating eyes.

The eyes of the two friends met. Questions flooded their locked gaze and pity mingled with admiration showed clearly. Morgan was unconscious of his nakedness and of his cracked lips and haggard face. He stood erect, rubbing his wrists where the buckskin thongs had bit deep. In both men's expression were the words: "Well, why don't you get going?"

Morgan spoke first. He tried to speak clearly and sharply in the crisp, commanding voice of an officer of the Army of the United States.

"I'm grateful, Sergeant, more than any words could ever tell you. Now I want you to ride out of here and report to Major Call. Persuade him to lead a strong detachment on Sicachi's trail and run him to death, if necessary."

Rodriguez had a vague smile on his lips as he shook his head.

"That's an order!" Morgan snapped, summoning some of the old spirit—the spit and polish of a cavalry officer.

The sergeant's smile spread, his white teeth showing. Then he began to laugh, low and quick and it quickly became louder and more raucous. He threw back his head and laughed until he had to brush the tears from his eyes. Rodriguez thought it was the funniest thing that had ever occurred in the army: a Lieutenant standing stark naked, half starved, gaunt, giving orders as if he were on a parade ground. He pointed to Morgan's nudeness, too convulsed with laughter to utter a lucid word.

The lieutenant looked down, frowning, then back at the subordinate who stood calmly defying his order. Then he too saw the ludicrous picture he must make, and he commenced to grin also. He winced slightly as his lips tautened and the raw, cracked places gave him painful twinges. Then this too amused him, and in another few seconds he had

[*Turn page*]

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given himself over to laughter as uproarious as the sergeant's. The bewildered Apaches looked at one another, then back at the two idiots within the circle of their guns.

Sicachi stood staring impassively at them. He sensed something of what was going on, but laid most of it to the effort the two men were making at bravado. They were simply using this laughter to show their contempt of what he might do to either or both of them. In his savage mind, he vowed that whichever stayed would live long, until the sun and the ants had eaten all the laughter from his body.

The laughter was dying down now, and as Morgan wiped the tears from his own eyes, he wasn't sure that some of them weren't the real thing. In all his long army career, Morgan had never had a loyalty and affection such as Rodriguez displayed, given to him. He realized the true loneliness of an officer's life. He had many advantages, but he missed out on the deep sense of brotherhood which the enlisted men knew—the easy camaraderie and the bond of equality. For the first time since he had been commissioned, Morgan wished that he had been an enlisted man.

"Lieutenant," Rodriguez said soberly, "I came in here for one purpose: to get you out. You've got to go, otherwise I've made all this trip for nothing. You owe me that much. I came of my own free will, without orders. You have no right to order me out now, and I refuse to go."

"Listen, Sergeant," Morgan said, "We haven't much time. Let's not waste it in arguing. Tell you what. We'll settle this in a fair and square manner. Got a coin?"

Rodriguez fished in his pocket, a queer look of triumph on his face and came up with a battered Mexican coin which he handed to Morgan. Morgan placed it on his thumb and forefinger and paused.

"You call it." The coin spun into the air, gleaming dully in the sun as it turned over and over.

"Tails."

BOTH men bent over the sand to see what had come up. They lifted their heads and their eyes met. The lieutenant was grinning.

Morgan picked up the coin and dropped it into Juan's hand. Absently, the sergeant pocketed it. He looked bleak and disappointed, but his mind was racing. Morgan shoved out his right hand, saying nothing, and Rodriguez took it and gripped it hard. He couldn't meet the officer's eyes; he was afraid that he would betray his intent.

Morgan shifted his eyes toward Sicachi, his jaw hardening determinedly. As his face half turned away, Rodriguez went into action. Throwing all his strength behind it, he swung his left hand hard, his knuckles cracking sharply on the quiet air as they connected with Morgan's exposed jaw. Without a sound the lieutenant crumpled to the ground. Rodriguez stood looking at him for a long time, his face sad, yet with triumph on it.

Then he turned and walked toward Sicachi who stepped out to meet him.

"I had hoped that it would be you who stayed," he said flatly. "But we will do what we can for the lieutenant."

"Put the lieutenant's blouse and pants on him and put him on a horse." Rodriguez said bluntly, his eyes as cold and unfathomable as Sicachi's. "It is I who will stay."

For the first time Sicachi's eyes flickered with interest. He came as close to a smile as he could ever manage, and without further ado he motioned to the Apaches to carry out Rodriguez's directions.

"When you felled the lieutenant, I thought for a moment that you had become a true Apache, Black One," he said sarcastically. "But I see that your years with the white men has made you think of life and death as they do. To the Apache, there is no honor in death. The only honor is in the death of others and the preservation of one's own life in order to kill again and again. I shall

[*Turn page*]

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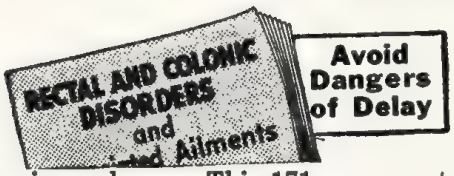

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see that you have none of the feelings of the white man left in you, soon."

He had walked over close to Rodriguez as he spoke. From the corner of his eye, Juan saw that the majority of the Apaches had relaxed their vigil and were carrying out his orders. Only two seemed to be intent on him and their leader, and even they were relaxed and off guard, their rifles sagging carelessly.

Rodriguez sprang like a panther. His right arm circled the neck of the Apache leader and his left hit him hard, several times, along the base of his skull. He felt the body go limp as he heard the shouts of the aroused Indians who now abandoned the officer and the horse they were preparing to tie him on and leaped for their guns!

Holding Sicachi's body carefully in front of him, he faced the uncertain Apaches.

"Get the lieutenant on that horse," he ordered harshly. "And bring a horse here for me and your leader. If you do not obey quickly, I will strangle him to death." The Apaches looked from one to the other as if waiting for someone to take command or at least point the way their action should take. Rodriguez tightened his bent arm under the chin of Sicachi, and the Apaches could see the muscles stand out as he tightened it, choking off the breath from the throat of their limp leader.

"Drop your guns, or he dies! Then do as I say."

A sullen muttering began among them, and they looked sourly at each other. Then two of them dropped their weapons and turned back to Lieutenant Morgan who was beginning to moan and move slightly on the ground. Quickly the others followed suit, letting their rifles fall to the ground reluctantly. The two hoisted Morgan up to the horse where he slumped in the saddle, regaining consciousness slowly.

One led an unsaddled pony to within a few feet of Rodriguez and stood looking at the harsh face of the sergeant defiantly. Rodriguez never slackened

the pressure on Sicachi's neck, dragging him over to the pony. He saw the beady eyes of the Apaches intent on every move he made, ready to leap for their guns at the instant they believed an opening had appeared.

He picked up the slight form of the leader in his arms and then put it down. He could never get up on the horse that way, he saw. He retained his bent arm hold about Sicachi's neck and in a surprising leap, the flung himself onto the pony's back, facing his rump. In the same motion he hauled Sicachi up by the neck and chin, holding him as a shield, as he had on the ground.

Morgan shook his head, taking in the strange scene before him. His mind quickly grasped the situation, and, noting that the Apaches were completely intent on Rodriguez and Sicachi, he quickly leaped down and grabbed two of the repeating rifles.

He scrambled back on the horse's back, holding the two guns levelled at the group of surly Apaches.

"Back up, away from those guns!" he croaked. They hesitated for an instant, flicking glances alternately at the man with the two rifles and the other white devil who was choking the life from their leader. Then they shuffled backward, slowly, reluctance and hatred in every move.

"All right, Sergeant, move out." Morgan said with deep satisfaction. The light in his eyes and the crazy smile on his dry lips told the Apaches that he would take particular delight in putting a bullet through the first one who moved.

Rodriguez kicked the pony into a jog, heading for the tortuous trail down from the plateau, making a ludicrous picture as he rode backwards, clutching the neck of the unconscious Apache in a deathlike grip.

Once under the shelter of the overhanging rocks, he twisted about in the regular manner, still retaining his hold on the precious hostage. He could hear the lieutenant's horse coming along be-

[*Turn page*]

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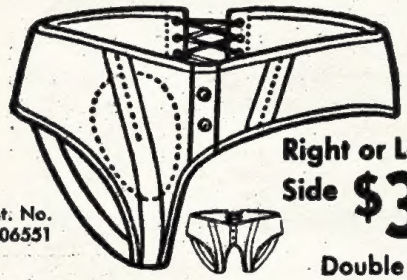

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hind, moving slowly. He could picture the officer riding half twisted in a move to keep his eye on the back trail, ready to wham a bullet at the first Apache foolhardy enough to follow.

Once on the level again, he waited for the lieutenant to catch up. In a few moments he appeared, a grim look of satisfaction on his dust and sweat caked face. He pulled up beside Rodriguez and grinned at him.

"Sergeant, hang on to that fellow, tight. They'll be coming after us pretty soon now and we might still need him!"

Rodriguez grinned.

"You're right, Lieutenant, we might at that. I was just wondering what would be happening if those animals up there knew that he's been dead for ten minutes." There was a grim, mocking humor in his eyes as Morgan glanced over, surprise giving way to an answering grin. He sobered suddenly.

"Saved the Army a hanging."

"I guess maybe I squeezed a little too hard." Rodriguez looked roguish.

"Come on, let's move." Morgan kicked the sides of the pony with his bare feet. "We'd better not feel too sure. Let's get back to the post."

They rode away in silence.

"In my report, I think I'll have to include a request for a commission for a Sergeant Rodriguez. There's a rule about striking an inferior in the Army. However, officers often peel down and settle things like gentlemen."

Rodriguez looked puzzled. "Huh?"

"Then, my fine friend, I'm going to take you out behind the horse corrals, where nobody else can see, and kick the living hell out of you for that cute little trick back there." He rubbed his jaw reflectively, gingerly, as the meaning of his remarks dawned on the sergeant's face. His eyes danced and his white teeth shone brightly.

Morgan scowled in mock severity.

"I mean it."

"Lieutenant," Rodriguez said with equal sincerity, in spite of his grin, "—that will be a pleasure." ● ● ●

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This card entitles you to Actual Lesson from NRI Course; see how you learn Radio-Television at home. You'll also receive my 64-page book, "How to be a Success in Radio-Television." You'll read what my graduates are doing, earning; see photos of equipment you practice with at home. Cut out and mail this card now!

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Mr. J. E. Smith, Pres., National Radio Inst., Washington 9, D.C.
Mail me Sample Lesson and Book, "How to be a Success in Radio-Television." (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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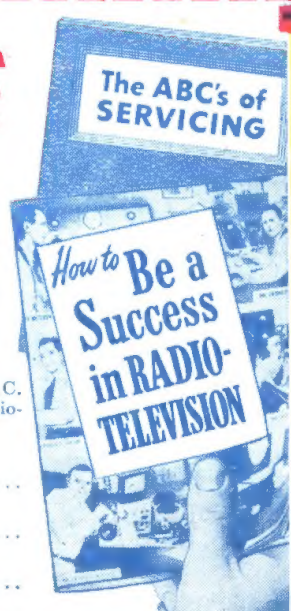

Want Your Own Business ?

Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Robert Dohmen, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown below, says, "Am now tied in with two television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Often fall back to NRI textbooks for information."